



Reports

When experienced regret refuses to fade: Regrets of action and attempting to forget open life regrets

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ABSTRACT

The emotional experience of regret often persists rather than fading over time. The present experiment with 101 student participants investigated whether recollecting life regrets of action, construing life regrets as psychologically open, or attempting to forget versus remember regret-related thoughts interfered with the fading of affect over a two-week interval. Results showed that regrets of action failed to show a fading affect pattern. In addition, disappointment failed to fade for regrets of inaction construed as open. Experienced regret failed to fade for regrets construed as open followed by attempts to forget regret-related thoughts. Intrusive and avoidant thoughts co-occurred with the latter disruptions in fading affect. Discussion concerns the causal relationship of memory and fading affect, and the different processes underlying fading of affect for discrete emotions.

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Introduction

Make the most of your regrets; never smother your sorrow.—Henry David Thoreau

Virtually everyone regrets choices made or paths not taken in life (Landman & Manis, 1992). People continue to experience painful regret years after they experience an undesired outcome (Wrosch, Bauer, & Scheier, 2005). The persistence of the experience of regret over time is puzzling, as people normally exhibit reduced emotional responses over time to remembered life experiences (Walker, Vogl, & Thompson, 1997). The tendency to experience reduced negative (but not necessarily positive) affect when recalling a life experience after the passage of time is the *fading affect bias*. The purpose of the present research was to explore the fading affect bias in the specific case of life regrets, in order to understand why experienced regret often persists rather than fading over time.¹

The fading affect bias is robust, as it can be seen over virtually any length of time (Walker et al., 1997). The fading affect bias is also moderated by a number of variables relevant to the emotion of regret. The present research examined three possible mechanisms that might theoretically interfere with the fading of the neg-

ative affective experience of regret. These three mechanisms include whether the life event was seen as a result of action versus inaction, the subjective sense of closure surrounding the recalled life event, and attempts to suppress unwanted regret-related thoughts.

Why experienced regret might resist the fading affect bias

Regret is defined as a counterfactual emotion, resulting from thoughts about how an undesired outcome could have turned out differently (Landman, 1987; Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007). Regret also involves a sense of personal responsibility for the undesired outcome (Connolly & Zeelenberg, 2002). This personal responsibility may entail one's own actions or one's own failure to act. In most cases, people experience more intense regret for outcomes that result from action rather than inaction. For example, people regret having changed a correct answer to an incorrect one more than they regret having failed to change an incorrect answer to a correct one (Kruger, Wirtz, & Miller, 2005).

People sometimes experience more intense regret for outcomes that result from inaction. For example, people regret inactions more than actions after the passage of significant amounts of time, or after a series of negative outcomes (Gilovich & Medvec, 1994; Zeelenberg, van den Bos, van Dijk, & Pieters, 2002). People also have better memory for life regrets of inaction, at least if the regret feels psychologically open rather than closed (Savitsky, Medvec, & Gilovich, 1997). Improved memory for open regrets of inaction in theory occurs due to a Zeigarnik-type effect, whereby the painful failure to achieve the desired outcome lingers in memory.

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¹ The term *experienced regret* is used to denote the emotional experience of regret, and the term *life regret* is used to denote the event or occurrence that is the source of the emotion of regret.

Because of the pain caused by such memories of a life regret, people may attempt to regulate experienced regret through suppression or denial (Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007). They may try—and fail—to forget about the life regret. Initial attempts to suppress unwanted thoughts may be successful, but as time goes on and people become distracted from their suppression efforts, the number of unwanted thoughts rebounds to a higher level than before suppression began (Abramowitz, Tolin, & Street, 2001; Wegner, Schneider, Carter, & White, 1987). Eventually one is left in a ruminative state, with the unwanted thought becoming hyperaccessible (Wegner & Erber, 1992). Experienced regret often does lead to rumination (Epstude & Roese, 2008), suggesting that failed attempts to forget about a life regret may be commonplace. People seem better served by trying to come to terms with rather than trying to forget their regrets, as coming to terms with regrets can lead to higher well-being and personal growth (King & Hicks, 2007; Torges, Stewart, & Miner-Rubino, 2005).

In many ways, the experience of regret and the fading affect bias are parallel. Just as experienced regret is more intense for events for which the self is to blame (Connolly & Zeelenberg, 2002), so too is the fading affect bias smaller for events that are perceived as self-caused (e.g., one's own actions are to blame; Ritchie et al., 2006). Just as life regrets of inaction are more persistent in memory for events that are perceived as open (Savitsky et al., 1997), so too is the fading affect bias smaller for events that are perceived as open (Ritchie et al., 2006). Just as life regrets have more negative consequences for those who avoid working through their implications (King & Hicks, 2007; Stewart & Vandewater, 1999), so too is the fading affect bias smaller for events that have not been worked through in discussions with others or in private rehearsal (Skowronski, Gibbons, Vogl, & Walker, 2004).

The present research represents an attempt to apply theories of the fading affect bias to the emotional consequences of life regrets. It explores whether the emotions surrounding life regrets are often resistant to the fading affect bias because people's life regrets are based on their own blameworthy actions, because people's life regrets are psychologically open, or because people try to forget rather than think about their life regrets.

Experimental manipulations of mechanisms of interest

Previous research has manipulated action versus inaction in life regrets by asking participants to think of a regret of action versus inaction (e.g., Savitsky et al., 1997). We attempted to manipulate participants' momentary construal of the life regret as one of action or inaction. Because this manipulation did not influence fading affect or thoughts, each participant's initial report of their life regret was simply categorized as one of action or inaction.

Previous research has manipulated the subjective sense of closure surrounding a memory by enhancing or reducing the emotional content of the memory. People experience more closure when they are induced to focus on objective and well-understood aspects of an event, and less closure when they are induced to focus on emotional and poorly understood aspects of an event (Beike & Wirth-Beaumont, 2005). The sense of closure, then, is a result of recollecting a memory in a way that brings to mind facets of the memory other than emotion. This sense of closure affects both the number of emotions the person recalls experiencing at the time, and the intensity of emotion the person experiences when recalling the event (Beike & Wirth-Beaumont, 2005). We employed a simpler way to manipulate closure, which also alters the emotional content of the memory: Participants were asked to consider ways in which their life regret was open ("unfinished business") versus closed ("a closed book") to them (Beike, Adams, & Wirth-Beaumont, 2007).

The standard manipulation of attempts to suppress an unwanted thought is to instruct participants not to think about a given

topic for a few minutes (e.g., Wegner et al., 1987). However, this standard method confounds the act of suppressing with an inferred need to use the suppressed thought (Lieberman & Förster, 2000). Moreover, the instruction to monitor for the presence of thoughts rather than the process of suppression itself may be the cause of rebound (Abramowitz et al., 2001; Whetstone & Cross, 1998).

To avoid these confounds, suppression was induced indirectly. Participants were instructed to try to forget (versus remember) newly learned information related to regret and recently paired with one's report of a life regret. We reasoned that trying to forget such material would also cause inhibition of the life regret itself. *Directed forgetting* of just-learned material leads to inhibition of the material. It effectively blocks the material from conscious recall and allows one to learn other information without interference (Sahakyan & Delaney, 2005). Like attempts to suppress unwanted thoughts, however, attempts to forget just-learned material result in full activation of the material in memory (Basden, Basden, & Gargano, 1993). The resulting state of implicit activation plus conscious inhibition is similar to the state created by thought suppression (Golding & Long, 1998; Wenzlaff & Wegner, 2000; Whetstone & Cross, 1998).

Overview and predictions

Participants in the present experiment were asked to recall a life regret, and were instructed to construe it as psychologically open or closed. Immediate ratings of affect were taken, including experienced regret, disappointment, emotion intensity, and general positive and negative affect. Participants then engaged in directed remembering or directed forgetting of regret-related words. Two weeks later, participants were asked to recall the life regret they had reported in the laboratory, to rate how well they remembered the event, how often they had experienced intrusive thoughts or tried to avoid thinking about the event, and their affective reaction to it.

Based on previous research on the fading affect bias, we predicted that the intensity of experienced regret and other negative emotions would reduce over time, but that this fading affect bias would be reduced among participants who reported a life regret of action (hypothesis 1), who construed their life regret as psychologically open (hypothesis 2), or who attempted to forget regret-related words (hypothesis 3). In addition, we predicted that the pattern obtained by Savitsky et al. (1997) would replicate for intrusive thoughts and fading affect. That is, life regrets of inaction construed as open were expected to lead to the most persistent intrusive thoughts and negative emotion (hypothesis 4).

Method

Participants

One hundred and fifteen students participated in exchange for partial fulfillment of a course requirement. Of these, three did not follow instructions, six did not complete the follow-up questionnaire, and five did not recall the same life regret at follow-up, leaving the responses from 36 males and 65 females. Participants' median age was 19, ranging from 18 to 27. Eighty-four participants identified themselves as Caucasian, 6 as African American, 6 as Latino or Hispanic, 3 as Asian, and 1 as Native American.

Materials

Life regret report

Participants were given an experiment booklet, which first asked them to describe briefly one of the biggest regrets of their life. If the greatest regret of their life concerned illegal activity or an

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