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Retrospective and Anticipated Regret for Self and Other: Implications for Health Behavior Decision-Making*



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All individuals hold a degree of uncertainty or doubt in their decision-making process. As theorized through the notion of counterfactual thinking, we frequently reflect on the alternatives or unrealized possibilities of our decisions (Rafetseder & Perner, 2012). This is often associated with sentiment such as guilt, shame, and regret. Regret is defined as an unpleasant emotion that is felt after a realization that a current situation would have been better had a different decision been made (Breugelmans, Zeelenberg, Gilovich, Huang, & Shani, 2014).

Regret is unique because of its direct association with decision-making. However, in the domain of health behavior decisions, the examination of regret has generally focused on anticipated regret (i.e., regret based on future decisions). The present study expands on previous research by exploring retrospective regret (i.e., regret based on past decisions) and comparing the two forms. Furthermore, this research examines whether the effects of regret are differentially influenced by the involvement of others in an experience of regret.

This exploratory study has several specific aims. First, we aim to disentangle the differences between regret focused on the past versus regret focused on the future. Second, we aim to determine how regret relates to social quality. Specifically, is regret for self experienced differently than regret for an other (i.e., family member, close friend, or individuals present), or for self and an other combined? Third, the study aims to determine whether there is an interaction between regret form and social quality. The fourth aim is to investigate potential moderating factors, such as personality.

The completion of this study relied on the voluntary participation of 286 undergraduate psychology students from a large Midwestern university. Students completed the study using the online survey software Qualtrics, in which they were asked to describe a personal regret experience. Participants were randomly assigned to a writing prompt involving one level of each independent variable: regret form (anticipated or retrospective) and social quality of regret (self, other, or self and other). Following the prompt, students

were asked several questions regarding their described experience. Multiple variables were assessed including negative affect, self-responsibility, self-blame, others responsible for the outcome, adaptive value, outcome severity, and the participant's desire to change behavior.

A series of 2 (Regret Form: Anticipated vs. Retrospective) x 3 (Social Quality: Self, Other, Self and Other) analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted to examine effects. Significant main effects of regret form were observed across numerous variables. Findings demonstrated that relative to retrospective regret, anticipated regret was associated with higher negative affect, self-responsibility, self-blame, outcome severity, and desire to change behavior. Analyses revealed no significant effect of social quality, and no significant interactions.

This study provides several noteworthy pieces of information. First and foremost, it made no difference whether an individual described an event relating to only themselves, a close other, or both. This would imply that regret is a very personal experience. This research also suggests that anticipated regret is more aversive than retrospective regret. Decision justification and the presence of impact bias are explored as explanations for this difference between regret form. Finally, this study serves as empirical evidence which supports anticipated regret as an effective intervention for health behavior, and direction is provided for future regret research.

*This scholar and faculty mentor have requested that only an abstract be published.