

## The Five Most Common Regrets

By Leslie vanWinkle

When we near the end of our life's journey, we often reflect back on how well we lived that life. With hindsight, we can see how we honored, or did not honor our desires and dreams. How we valued our relationships, our dreams. Did we play? Did we grow a compassionate heart? Did we love?

These questions can bring up emotions about our choices and experiences. We may feel satisfaction and joy. We may find regret lurking in our belly for the things we did not do, and remorse for things we did. We may find bitter denial of responsibility for our choices, or anger at ourselves for those choices.

People in this reflective stage of their life often share some common regrets. Many look back at dreams that went unfulfilled and at relationships that fell by the wayside. Some see the price they paid for working too hard at the expense of other parts of their lives. Many share regrets about the time and effort they gave to meeting the expectations of other people, while ignoring their own dreams.

Here are the five most common regrets people acknowledge when looking back at their life journey.

### **1. I wish I'd had the courage to be true to myself instead of doing what other people expected me to do.**

Attempting to meet the expectations of other people will steal your life force. It can prevent you from making your own contribution to the world. While helping other people and gaining their approval feels good, the price can be your own joy.

Each person comes into the world with talent, dreams, and desires. As young children, we often demonstrate our unique talents, which foreshadow the contribution we are designed to make during our lifetime. Maybe we rescued birds with their broken wings. Maybe we painted our bedroom walls with murals of jungle animals. Maybe we tinkered with Legos™ or pounded nails into wood just to hear that happy thunk. Maybe we were the first to greet a new classmate, or the play-yard nurse ready to tend to our friend's scuffed knees.

Humans are social animals and we often make choices that gain the acceptance of our families and communities. If this was your path, ultimately you will meet yourself on life's road and wonder who you have become. Being true to yourself does not necessarily mean rejecting who you are now, it simply means you get to add more pieces to the puzzle that is your whole self.

What were some of your early talents? What were your daydreams? Did you pursue those dreams or did the expectations of other people shape your life? If you are still breathing it is not too late to add some of those pieces now.

## **2. I wish I had not worked so hard.**

The average person lives 80 years, or about 700,800 hours. Working at a nine-to-five job, (with a commute), for 40 years consumes at least 104,000 of those hours. If you find satisfaction and fulfillment during your working hours, then that work experience enriches you. If it does not enrich you, then it robs you.

That said, even if we love our work, we can still work too much. If we work too hard for too long, we risk burning out and harming our health. We also risk the health of our relationships with others and with ourselves.

It is important that we maintain a good balance in our lives. Sometimes that requires that we reassess how much time we spend earning a dollar as opposed to learning to love.

How well are you nurturing your relationships? Do you pursue your passion? Are you developing your talents? Are you tending to your spiritual growth?

## **3. I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings.**

As human beings we are equipped with a wide range of positive and negative emotions. We can't avoid having these feelings. In fact, much of what makes us human is our ability to express our feelings.

Many people can identify their feelings and have no difficulty expressing them in appropriate ways. Others are less skilled and feel awkward when asked, "How do you feel?" Others deny they even have feelings.

Sometimes it just takes too much courage to feel our feelings, much less express them. They overwhelm us. They feel too big to handle. They are too muddled to understand. So, we dump them into our ocean of things-best-left-unexamined.

Other times, we got negative responses when we expressed our feelings and so we learned to shut them down. We repress them and ignore them and pay the cost. Repressing our feelings can lead to chronic

pain and emotional distress. In fact, many health issues can be traced to negative feelings that have turned inward to sabotage the body.

So what are the most common feelings we have learned to repress?

- Anger, of course. There are few safe times to express anger. We often learn to abdicate our power in relationships in order to avoid conflict and the anger it can generate.
- We may never find the appropriate time to express our feelings of loss and grief.
- Frustration and bitterness rarely find a welcome audience.

We can feel hurt by the circumstances of our lives, by the pain of mismanaged relationships, and by our own disappointed expectations – and never claim the right to tell people how we feel.

The longer we wait to express our feelings, the more difficult the process can become. If it is not appropriate to share your feelings, you can still express them for your own well-being. You can keep a journal, paint a picture, write poems or fictional stories. Or you might pour your pain into the heart of a compassionate counselor or friend.

Not all suppressed feelings are negative. People have reasons to cloak their positive feelings, too. We may have unexpressed or inappropriate love for someone in our life, or feel we must withhold our approval of someone or something. We may want to celebrate some accomplishment or send our good wishes to a friend, and yet, we don't. In the case of unexpressed positive emotions, we are withholding love. This hurts the heart of the world.

#### **4. I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends.**

As the years pass, we often lose touch with our childhood friends, schoolmates, and work buddies. These people from our past are important in many ways. They are witnesses to different parts of your life journey. They share your memories and experiences in a way that gives them insight and compassion.

For example, high school reunions bring us together with friends who remind us of our early enthusiasms and personal expectations. Friends from the different periods of our lives give us perspective on what we have or have not accomplished. Old friends give us the opportunity to celebrate together in ways that new friends can't. It widens our own experience when we connect with

a friend we haven't talked to in 20 years and find out that they are now grandparents, or on their third marriage, or just returned from a world cruise, or are battling an illness.

How many long-time friends do you stay in touch with? When was the last time you wrote a letter to them, or called them on the phone? How about those friends who have drifted away? Can you find them on Facebook? It's time to connect to the people, who have traveled with you on your journey.

## **5. I wish I had let myself be happier.**

It is surprising how many people do not realize that happiness is a choice. Even in the most dire circumstances, we can always find some way to celebrate the fact that we are alive. Life itself is a cause for joy. Feeling that joy is a choice.

Just as life is here to be enjoyed, fear is the greatest enemy of that joy. So many of us live a life stuck in old patterns and habits and hindered by our fear of the unknown. These fears can create comfort zones that keep us safe for possible disappointment. These comfort zones can take the form of physical limitations, or excuses we use to avoid risking failure, or habits we form to avoid relationships.

Our comfort zone is usually based on some fear we have about the unknown and potential pain. So we live a small life in order to avoid that pain. Yet, when we place limits on ourselves, we also block ourselves from experiencing potential joy and happiness.

Our fears can cause us to pretend that we are content, when deep inside we long to laugh, dance, and sing silly songs. We long to take that road trip to Florida, or start that small business landscaping patios, or audition for the community theater. Yet, we stay inside our comfort zone of familiar patterns, even when those patterns do not bring us joy, because, well, they keep us safe.

We imagine monsters live beyond our comfort zone. Trying new things is be scary. We forget that the forging into the unknown can also reveal gifts. That exhilaration you feel when you launch into some new thing is joy coursing through your veins. It is the adrenaline and enthusiasm that meets life as an adventure. It is the part of you that is fearless.

So what if you fail? So what if you risk rejection? So what if people laugh?

So what? You're still breathing. And as long as you are breathing, you can still sing that silly song. Because, happiness is a choice.