

What's the rush? Taking time to acknowledge loss is not that bad

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There are two guarantees in every person's life: happiness and sadness. Although lost opportunities and mistaken expectations are often unpleasant to think and talk about, these experiences may impact personality development and overall happiness. A seven-year study conducted by Laura King, a researcher at the University of Missouri, indicates that individuals who take time to stop and think about their losses are more likely to mature and achieve a potentially more durable sense of happiness.

“People are generally in a hurry to be happy again, but they need to understand that it's okay to feel bad and to feel bad for a while,” said King, who teaches psychology in the College of Arts and Science. “It's natural to want to feel happy right after a loss or regrettable experience, but those who can examine ‘what might have been’ and be mindfully present to their negative feelings, are more likely to mature through that loss and might also obtain a different kind of happiness.”

Drawing on samples of adults who have experienced significant life changing events, including parents of children with Down syndrome, women who have experienced divorce after marriages of more than 20 years, and gay men and lesbians, King examined the participants' written accounts of their current best possible selves and unattainable best possible selves that they may have once cherished. Answering questions like, “How great would your life have been if only...,” King found that those who could acknowledge a past characterized by loss were more likely to show personality development over time.

Additionally, the study – Whatever Happened to “What Might Have Been?” – found that those who might consider themselves complacent or happy but simple tend to diminish regret by focusing on goals that are still available. One participant said, “All of these goals are still attainable, even though we have a child with Down syndrome.” In contrast, those who scored high on both well-being and personality development were able to acknowledge a challenging life experience, as one gay man who wrote vividly about the difficulties of a gay person in a homophobic society, while maintaining his commitment to his current life dreams.

“People change after potentially tragic events; it is unrealistic to think that you can go right back to the way you were before the event,” King said. “It might be best to try and make meaning out of what has happen and start a new life that is tied to what you have learned from the change. Being happy is not about forgetting the past, but forming a life that is founded on what you had before, or who you used to be.”

Source: University of Missouri-Columbia

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