

Woulda, coulda, shoulda: The haunting regret of failing our ideal selves

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Forsaken dreams. Romantic interests not pursued. Securing a job near home rather than an adventurous position overseas.

Our most enduring [regrets](#) are the ones that stem from our failure to live up to our ideal selves, according to new Cornell University research.

Psychologist Tom Gilovich and former Cornell graduate student Shai Davidai have found people are haunted more by regrets about failing to fulfill their hopes, goals and aspirations than by regrets about failing to fulfill their duties, obligations and responsibilities.

The research, "The Ideal Road Not Taken," was published in the journal *Emotion*. It builds on the idea that three elements make up a person's sense of self: the actual, ideal and the ought selves. The actual self is made up of the attributes a person believes they possess. The ideal self is the attributes they would ideally like to possess, such as hopes, goals, aspirations or wishes. The ought self is the person they feel they should have been based on duties, obligations and responsibilities.

Gilovich and Davidai surveyed hundreds of participants through the course of six studies, describing the differences between the ought and ideal selves, and asking them to list and categorize their regrets based on these descriptions.

The participants said they experienced regrets about their ideal self far more often (72 percent versus 28 percent). More than half mentioned more ideal-self regrets than ought-self regrets when asked to list their regrets in life so far. And when asked to name their single biggest regret in life, 76 percent of participants mentioned a regret about not fulfilling their ideal self.

Why do ideal-self failures spark such enduring regret? The expectations of the ought self are usually more concrete and involve specific rules—such as how to behave at a funeral—and so are easier to fulfill. But ideal-related regrets tend to be more general: Be a good parent, be a good mentor. "Well, what does that mean, really?" Gilovich said. "There

aren't clear guideposts. And you can always do more."

The research has practical implications, he said. First, we often assume we first need inspiration before we can strive to achieve our ideals. But a significant amount of psychological research shows that's not true, Gilovich said.

"As the Nike slogan says: 'Just do it,'" he said. "Don't wait around for inspiration, just plunge in. Waiting around for [inspiration](#) is an excuse. Inspiration arises from engaging in the activity."

And people often fail to achieve their ideal goals because they're worried about how it will look to others. For example, a person might want to learn how to sing but feel they could never let others hear how bad they are.

Again, Gilovich says, just do it.

"People are more charitable than we think and also don't notice us nearly as much as we think," he said. "If that's what holding you back—the fear of what other people will think and notice—then think a little more about just doing it."

More information: Shai Davidai et al, The ideal road not taken: The self-discrepancies involved in people's most enduring regrets., *Emotion* (2017). [DOI: 10.1037/emo0000326](https://doi.org/10.1037/emo0000326)

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