

# Research suggests a practical use for regret, hindsight

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Robin Kowalski, professor in Clemson University's psychology department, is willing to bet there's not a single person who hasn't thought about this at least once in the last year. Her research indicates the odds are pretty good that she's right. Credit: Clemson University

How many times have you wished you could give your younger self a piece of advice? Robin Kowalski, professor in Clemson University's psychology department, is willing to bet there's not a single person who

hasn't thought about this at least once in the last year. Her research indicates the odds are pretty good that she's right.

Kowalski's results have revealed that many people have these thoughts multiple times per week, and for many this mental exercise is anything but futile. Her latest article in *the Journal of Social Psychology*, "If I knew then what I know now: Advice to my younger self," analyzes the results of two studies of more than 400 individuals 30 years of age or older. Kowalski said the results have been truly revealing about the nature of regret, how people can use it to self-actualize and what areas people tend to fixate on in their later years.

## **You shouldn't dwell on the past, right?**

"My findings would suggest otherwise as long as you're not obsessing about it," Kowalski said. One third of the participants in the study spontaneously think about advice they would offer their younger selves at least once a week, which is a significant number.

These people—and those who may think about the past a little less—can benefit from doing so because it helps them conceptualize and even realize their "ideal self," which reflects who the person thinks they would like to be. "Following the advice helped participants overcome regret," Kowalski said. "When participants followed their advice in the present, they were much more likely to say that their younger selves would be proud of the person they are now."

Kowalski also found that almost half of participants said the advice they would offer their younger selves influenced their description of their future selves, whether that was "successful and financially stable" or "old and decrepit."

## **What areas do people tend to focus on when it comes to advice to the younger self?**

Kowalski said the top three areas clearly are education, self-worth and relationships. Advice tied to education often was individuals urging themselves to return to or finish school and many participants offered a timeline, such as "get master's while in your 20s" or "finish college in four years."

Advice related to self-worth, such as "be yourself" or "think through all options before making a decision," tended to be more inspirational and corrective than the more temporal advice about education.

Kowalski said all of this advice, particularly related to relationships, can lead to corrective behavior. "My favorite piece of advice in the whole paper came from a guy who said 'Do. Not. Marry. Her.,'" Kowalski says. "That's valuable for the person that he is now because he can reflect and have a better idea of what he's looking for in an ideal mate, plus he can offer advice to others."

## **Does the younger self tend to be a certain age?**

Kowalski's findings are consistent with research on the "reminiscence bump," which is the tendency for [older adults](#) to have increased recollection for events that occurred during their adolescence and early adulthood. Most of the advice participants offered to themselves was tied to a pivotal event that had occurred between the ages of 10 and 30.

"These are critical years; people go through high school and college, get married, have kids and start their careers," Kowalski said. "On the one hand you can say, 'Duh, of course these are important years,' but when we separated positive pivotal events and negative pivotal events, almost

all of them fell into that time period. It's interesting to find clear evidence to support the reminiscence bump."

## **Will this research make it more likely that children will follow their parents' advice?**

"No," Kowalski said, laughing, "but that's an interesting way of looking at things, because I think children between 10 and 30 tend to deny how similar they are to their parents. If they embraced it they might be more likely to listen to the advice their parents would have given to their younger selves, and the closest thing to that younger self is their children."

## **What surprised you about this research?**

Kowalski said the honesty and poignancy of some of the responses were surprising. Many had to do with addiction, and one participant offered [advice](#) to his younger self that would have prevented a car accident that killed his uncle.

Kowalski's other research interests include cyberbullying and hazing, but she said she's only preoccupied with these "dark side" subjects because it helps her appreciate the light.

"There's a real emotional pull to this topic and it's what drew me to it in the first place," Kowalski said. "These are two of my favorite studies I've ever done because everyone can relate to it and everyone has asked themselves this question."

## **What could a young Robin Kowalski learn from today's Robin Kowalski?**

"I would do high school totally differently. I was so academically focused, so I think I would tell myself to have a little bit more fun and enjoy [high school](#) a little more."

**More information:** Robin M. Kowalski et al, If I knew then what I know now: Advice to my younger self, *The Journal of Social Psychology* (2019). [DOI: 10.1080/00224545.2019.1609401](https://doi.org/10.1080/00224545.2019.1609401)

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