

# The Power of Regret

An Interview with Daniel H. Pink

**EDITORS' NOTE** Daniel H. Pink is the author of five New York Times bestsellers, including his latest, *The Power of Regret: How Looking Backward Moves Us Forward*. His other books include the New York Times bestsellers *When and A Whole New Mind* – as well as the #1 New York Times bestsellers *Drive* and *To Sell is Human*. Pink's books have won multiple awards, have been translated into 42 languages, and have sold millions of copies around the world. Pink was host



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and co-executive producer of “*Crowd Control*,” a television series about human behavior on the National Geographic Channel that aired in more than 100 countries. He hosts a popular MasterClass on sales and persuasion. He has appeared frequently on NPR, PBS, ABC, CNN, and other TV and radio networks in the U.S. and abroad. He has been a contributing editor at Fast Company and Wired as well as a business columnist for The Sunday Telegraph. His articles and essays have also appeared in The New York Times, Harvard Business Review, The Atlantic, Slate, and other publications. He was a Japan Society Media fellow in Tokyo, where he studied the country's massive comic industry. Before venturing out on his own 20 years ago, Pink worked in several positions in politics and government, including serving from 1995 to 1997 as chief speechwriter to Vice President Al Gore. He received a BA from Northwestern University, where he was a Truman Scholar and was elected to Phi Beta Kappa, and a JD from Yale Law School. He has also received honorary doctorates from Georgetown University, the Pratt Institute, the Ringling College of Art and Design, the University of Indianapolis, and Westfield State University.

**Did you always know that you had a passion for writing and that this was how you wanted to focus your life's work?**

No. Not at all. My path – like so many paths – was convoluted and nonlinear. I went to college and majored in linguistics. Go figure. Then, because I was a middle-class kid who wanted “something to fall back on,” I went to law school. I decided pretty quickly that I couldn't be a lawyer, but I was keenly interested in politics, so that's the route I took.

I worked in some campaigns and then – again, in an unplanned, haphazard way – I became a political speechwriter. Eventually I ended up in the White House as chief speechwriter to Vice President Gore. That job was cool, but I discovered I didn't want to work in politics the rest of my life.

See? I told you the story was convoluted.

But from the time I was in high school, I was always “writing on the side.” I'd write newspaper op-eds, magazine columns, feature articles –

mostly just for fun. I even did it late at night, usually for no pay, when I was working in political jobs. Eventually I realized that what I was doing on the side is what I should be doing in the center – that if I watched what I actually did, I was a writer. So, in 1997, I quit the White House job – my wife kept her job and our health insurance – and decided to try to make a living writing my own stuff.

**What interested you in writing the book, *The Power of Regret*, and what are the key messages you wanted to convey in the book?**

The main reason is that I had regrets of my own. I'd reached a stage in life where, to my surprise, I had mileage on me – room to

look back. And when I looked back, there were things I wish I had done, things I wish I hadn't done, things I wished I had done differently.

So, I began several years of work trying to understand this profoundly misunderstood emotion. I looked at about 60 years of academic research – social psychology, developmental psychology, cognitive science, neuroscience, and other fields – on the topic. And I conducted two big research projects of my own.

That yielded three key points. First, regret makes us human. Everyone has regrets. It's one of the most common emotions we have. It is ubiquitous in the human experience. Second, regret makes us better. Regret is there for a reason; it's part of our cognitive machinery. And if we treat it right – not ignoring our regrets or wallowing in them, but confronting them – there's ample evidence it improves our performance and bolsters learning, growth, and overall well-being. Third, regret clarifies what we value. When people tell you what they regret the most, they're also telling you what they value the most.

**Will you highlight the World Regret Survey you conducted and the key takeaways from the survey?**

This is one of the research projects I mentioned. In 2020, I established a website that I call the World Regret Survey. I invited

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The biggest takeaway: Around the world, people seem to have the same four core regrets.

**Will you discuss the four core regrets?**

The regrets have less to do with the surface domains of life – career, education, and so on – and more to do with something deeper. The four are:

Foundation regrets – Regrets about small decisions early in life that accumulate to terrible consequences later in life. For example, spending too much and saving too little, not exercising or eating right, not studying hard enough in school.

Boldness regrets – Regrets about playing it safe rather than taking a chance. For example, not starting a business, not asking someone out on a date, not speaking up for a cause.

Moral regrets – Regrets about doing the wrong thing. For example, cheating on a spouse, bullying someone.

Connection regrets – Regrets about relationships, especially not taking steps to fix them. For example, not calling an old friend, not reaching out to a relative, not forming bonds with co-workers.

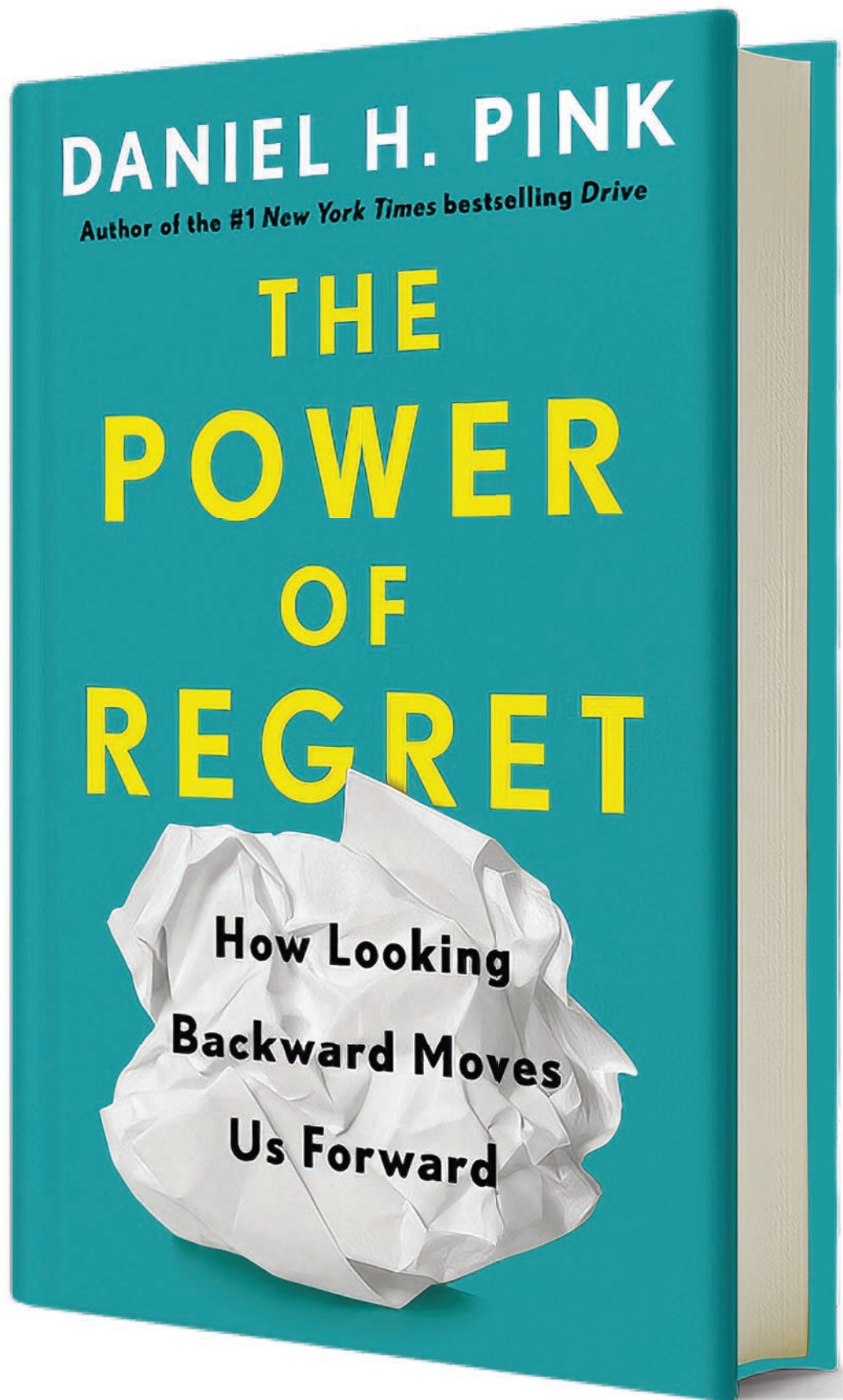
As I mentioned before, these are revealing. When people tell you what they regret the most, they're telling you what they value the most. These four regrets offer a reverse image of what people want out of life. Stability, learning and growth, goodness, and love. That's it. Everything else is commentary.

**You have spent your career studying human behavior. What have you learned and what has surprised you?**

Oh my, too many things to list, but I've been especially surprised by two phenomena. First, we believe we're much more unique than we really are. Regret is a good example. If you were to give me just about any regret someone had, I could likely find the same regret in my database in 60 seconds – and I'd be as likely to find it in Malaysia or Chile as in the U.S. We are gripped by a kind of pluralistic ignorance in that we don't think other people share our preferences or experiences when often – very often – they do. Second, when we try to explain people's behavior or predict people's behavior, we too often overweight the importance of personality and underweight the importance of the context and environment. We say, "He did that because he's an introvert." Or "She did that because she's a jerk." But, in fact, the better explanation is the situation they're in. Maybe that person is acting like a jerk not because she's an awful person, but because she's late or she's tired or she just got laid off or she just received bad news. Put her in other situations – and she might behave differently.

**How do you approach regret in your own life?**

I'll give you one example. I have regrets about kindness. I was never a bully, but earlier in my life I was often in situations where people



were being excluded or left out or not being treated fairly. I saw it. I knew it was wrong, but I didn't do or say anything. That's bugged me for decades. I could have ignored that regret. Bad idea. I could have wallowed in it. Worse idea. Instead, I confronted it. I treated myself with kindness rather than contempt – because I knew lots of other people had similar regrets. I talked about the regret both to relieve the

burden and to make sense of the regret. And I tried to draw lessons from it for future behavior. Now, if I'm in situations where people are being left out, I try to bring them in. If people are being mistreated, I try to stand up. I'm not perfect, but my experience shows the power of regret. If we reckon with this emotion rather than avoid it, it clarifies what we value and instructs us on how to do better. ●