# The Ideal Road Not Taken: The Self-Discrepancies Involved in People's Most Enduring Regrets

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Research on the structural features of people's most enduring regrets has focused on whether they result from having acted or having failed to act. Here we focus on a different structural feature, their connection to a person's self-concept. In 6 studies, we predict and find that people's most enduring regrets stem more often from discrepancies between their actual and ideal selves than their actual and ought selves. We also provide evidence that this asymmetry is at least partly due to differences in how people cope with regret. People are quicker to take steps to cope with failures to live up to their duties and responsibilities (ought-related regrets) than their failures to live up to their goals and aspirations (ideal-related regrets). As a consequence, ideal-related regrets are more likely to remain unresolved, leaving people more likely to regret not being all they could have been more than all they should have been.

*Keywords:* regret, counterfactual thinking, coping, self-discrepancy theory

When you are a little kid, you are a bit of everything—artist, scientist, athlete, scholar. Sometimes, it seems life is like a process of giving those things up, one by one. I guess we all have one thing we regret giving up. One thing we really miss. And we gave up because we were too lazy. We couldn't stick it out. Or because we were afraid.

—*The Wonder Years*

On her 75th birthday, the actress Brigitte Bardot stated that she regretted nothing. The opinion is not uncommon, having been advanced most memorably by Bardot's compatriot Edith Piaf, and it is frequently expressed in the form of "If I could go back and do it all over again, I wouldn't change a thing." Still, although many people boast of their lack of regrets, few of us are genuine strangers to the emotion. People report regretting such things as marrying the wrong person, opting for a secure job near home over an adventurous position overseas, or forgoing a stimulating college major for one with better job prospects. It is therefore not surprising that research examining what people regret most (and why) has flourished over the last 2 decades (Gilovich & Medvec, 1995; Roese & Summerville, 2005; Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007).

Scholars of regret often distinguish between regrets of action and inaction. Although both types of regret are common, it is now well documented that people's most frequently mentioned regrets involve things they didn't do and wish they had done rather than things they did and wish they hadn't (Davison & Feeney, 2008; Feldman, Miyamoto, & Loftus, 1999; Gilovich & Medvec, 1994, 1995; Gilovich, Medvec, & Kahneman, 1998; Hattiangadi, Medvec, & Gilovich, 1995; Morrison & Roese, 2011). For instance, Gilovich and Medvec (1994) found that when asked about their biggest mistakes in life, people were more likely to mention their failures to act on past opportunities than their regrettable actions, a finding that was replicated both with an intellectually gifted population (Hattiangadi, Medvec, & Gilovich, 1995); a nationally representative sample (Morrison & Roese, 2011); and in China, Japan, and Russia (Gilovich, Wang, Regan, & Nishina, 2003).

Several mechanisms have been proposed to explain this asymmetry between regrets of action and inaction. First, after experiencing regret over something said or done, people tend to take steps to undo the action's consequences. Although one cannot take back a disastrous action or hurtful comment, restitutions and apologies can diminish the intensity of regret (van der Pligt, Zeelenberg, & Manstead, 1998). In contrast, "undoing" a failure to act is often impossible. The one who got away may now be married to someone else; some talents can only be fully developed if one starts young; a once-in-a-lifetime job opportunity comes around only once. Even when ameliorative action is possible, people find it difficult to overcome the inertia inherent in one's earlier inaction (Tykocinski & Pittman, 1998).

Second, what cannot be addressed materially or behaviorally is often dealt with psychologically, and people are typically better able to rationalize their mistakes of action than their mistakes of inaction. It is generally easier for people to identify a silver lining in their regrettable actions by focusing on important lessons learned, new relationships forged, and new doors opened. Not acting, or acting the same as one always has, rarely provides the same sort of compensatory benefits (Gilovich & Medvec, 1995). Furthermore, the initial "I could just kick myself" pain of regret-

table actions (Miller & Taylor, 1995) tends to elicit more vigorous efforts to reduce cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957; Gilovich, Medvec, & Chen, 1995; Zanna & Cooper, 1974).

In addition to those processes that reduce the pain of regrettable actions, two additional factors often operate to bolster the pain of regrettable inactions. First, inactions tend to be seen as less justified in retrospect. Although the reasons that prevent people from acting are compelling at the time, they are often experienced as less so down the road. A contemporaneous fear of failure, for example, often gives way to more confident retrospective evaluations of one's likelihood of success (Gilovich, Kerr, & Medvec, 1993). Second, people tend to remember their unrealized goals better than those that have been fulfilled (Zeigarnik, 1935) and many regrets of inaction are exactly that—unfulfilled goals. People are therefore more likely to call to mind and be bothered by their regrets of inaction than their regrets of action (Savitsky, Medvec, & Gilovich, 1997; see also Rajagopal, Raju, & Unnava, 2006).

Together, these processes contribute to the preponderance of inactions in people's most frequently mentioned life regrets. Note that they all involve the structural property of how the regret was brought about rather than what is regretted. A more complete understanding of the psychology of regret requires an analysis of the specific themes reflected in people's most common regrets (see Roese & Summerville, 2005, for an informative example). Are there systematic patterns to what people regret, centered around specific life domains and leading to unique phenomenological experiences? Here we argue that the nature of people's regrets can be better understood by examining their connection to two distinct aspects of the self, the "ideal" and "ought" self.

## Self-Discrepancy Theory and Regulatory Focus

Higgins (1987) described three elements that make up a person's sense of self: the actual, ideal, and ought selves. A person's actual self is her representation of the attributes she (or others) believes she possesses. The ideal self is her representation of the attributes she (or others) would ideally like to possess (e.g., her hopes, goals, aspirations, or wishes). The ought self is her representation of the attributes she (or others) believes she should possess (e.g., her duties, obligations, and responsibilities). A grasp of these three elements and the discrepancies between them provides a roadmap to understanding the individual's sense of self and her characteristic emotions and patterns of behavior.

According to self-discrepancy theory, gaps between how an individual perceives her actual self and her ideal and ought selves lead to predictable patterns of negative emotions (Higgins, 1987). Although people experience discomfort both when they fail to live up to their ideal self and when they fail to live up to their ought self, the two types of discrepancies elicit different emotions. When people believe they are failing to live up to their ideal self, they experience dejection-related emotions such as sadness and disappointment. In contrast, when people believe they are failing to live up to their ought self, they experience agitation-related emotions such as fear, guilt, and restlessness (Higgins et al., 1985). To understand an individual's negative emotions, one has to understand the expectations she has for herself and her perceived failure to meet them.

In this paper, we use insights from self-discrepancy theory to examine the content of people's regrets. Gilovich et al. (1998) found that different types of regret are associated with different patterns of negative emotions. Regrets of action tend to elicit "hot" emotions like anger, irritation, and disgust; regrets of inaction tend to elicit somewhat cooler emotions like despair, sadness, and emptiness. Given the conceptual similarity between Higgins' (1987) distinction between agitation- and dejection-related emotions and Gilovich et al.'s (1998) distinction between "hot" and "despair" emotions, we hypothesized that people's most enduring regrets in life tend to result from discrepancies between their actual and ideal selves rather than their actual and ought selves.

Our predictions are in line with, but also expand upon, previous research on regulatory focus and regret. Previous investigators proposed cognitive (Roese, Hur, & Pennington, 1999), motivational (Leder, Florack, & Keller, 2013; Roese, Summerville, & Fessel, 2007), and evolutionary (Roese et al., 2006) accounts of the relationship between people's regrets and their ideal and ought selves. Roese, Hur, and Pennington (1999), for example, showed that promotion-focused goals (i.e., those related to hopes, accomplishments, aspirations; Higgins, 1997) tend to be associated with additive counterfactuals regarding failures to act. In contrast, prevention-focused goals (i.e., those related to responsibilities, duties, safety) tend to be associated with subtractive counterfactuals regarding past actions (Roese, Hur, & Pennington, 1999). These associations are said to reflect differences in how people evaluate their past behavior and how they regulate their future behavior and goal pursuits (Roese, Summerville, & Fessel, 2007). For example, basing their predictions on the evolutionary theory of mate selection, Roese and colleagues (2006) have shown that males and females differ in their most common romantic regrets. Whereas males, who are thought to be more promotion-oriented in relation to romance and sexual activity, tend to regret their failures to seize romantic opportunities, females are more likely to regret their past actions in this domain.

To the extent that the anticipation of future regret can guide people toward less-regrettable courses of action (Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007), the relation between people's regrets and their ideal and ought selves should inform their future behavior. Indeed, Leder, Florack, and Keller (2013), found that people who are chronically promotion-focused anticipate experiencing more regret from not fulfilling their ideal goals (rather than their ought goals) and choose accordingly. Thus, given the associations between regulatory focus and counterfactual thinking, and given the prominence of inactions in people's most enduring regrets (Gilovich & Medvec, 1995), one would expect people to have more regrets centered around promotion-focused and ideal-self discrepancies than around prevention-focused and ought self-discrepancies.[1]

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[1] In her book *The Top Five Regrets of the Dying*, Bonnie Ware, a palliative nurse, compiled the regrets most often expressed by patients nearing the ends of their lives (Ware, 2013). Although anecdotal, her observations are in line with our hypothesis. The most commonly cited regret mentioned by Ware's patients was, "I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me." As stated by Ware:

> When people realize that their life is almost over and look back clearly on it, it is easy to see how many dreams have gone unfulfilled. Most people had not honored even a half of their dreams and had to die knowing that it was due to choices they had made, or not made.

We explore this hypothesis in the present article, along with a novel mechanism to account for the preponderance of ideal-related regrets in people's lives. We argue that failures to live up to one's ideal self inspire less extensive coping efforts than failures to live up to one's ought self. Thus, one reason that failures to live up to the ideal self tend to remain salient in people's minds is that they do not elicit as much psychological and behavioral repair work as failures to live up to the ought self. The immediate guilt, anxiety, and agitation that come from failures to live up to one's duties and responsibilities are "hot" emotions that beg for quick resolution. In contrast, the slowly accumulating disappointment, discouragement, and dejection that come from failures to live up to one's goals and aspirations are less likely to elicit the same immediate reactions. People may sometimes feel the urge to resolve their ideal-related regrets, but these typically take a backseat to more urgent and pressing ought-related regrets.[2] As a result, although the initial sting of ought-related regrets may be more intense, ideal-related regrets may prove more bothersome—and more enduring—in the long run. Thus, in addition to thinking differently about their ought-related and ideal-related regrets (Roese, Hur, & Pennington, 1999), we argue that people also cope differently with the two types of regret.

We therefore examine the relationship between self-discrepancies and people's most common and persistent regrets. Building upon self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987), we hypothesized that people's most enduring and persistent life regrets would mainly involve unfulfilled dreams, unmet goals, and dashed aspirations (i.e., actual–ideal discrepancies) rather than unfulfilled duties, unmet obligations, and undispatched responsibilities (i.e., actual–ought discrepancies). Simply put, we hypothesized that people are more likely to regret not being all that they could have been rather than not being all that they should have been.

As an initial test of our hypothesis, we recoded data reported in Gilovich and Medvec (1994). These data included the regrets of 24 undergraduate students, 26 employees and emeritus professors at Cornell University, and 11 residents of old-age homes. Two research assistants, blind to our hypothesis, coded the regrets for whether they involved failures to live up to the ideal or ought self. They were provided definitions of the *ideal self* ("a person's beliefs concerning the attributes they would like to ideally possess; their ultimate goals for themselves") and the *ought self* ("a person's beliefs concerning the attributes they believe they should or ought to possess; their normative rules or prescriptions for themselves") and then were asked to indicate whether each regret related more to the former or the latter. The coders agreed on 177 of the 235 regrets (75%).[3] Disagreements were resolved by a third coder, also blind to the hypothesis. As predicted, respondents more frequently mentioned failures to live up to their ideal selves ($N = 142$; 60.4%) than their ought selves ($N = 93$; 39.6%), $\chi^2(1) = 10.22$; $p = .001$.

In what follows we further examine the relationship between self-discrepancy theory and people's most common regrets. In Study 1, we directly asked participants which they regret more—failing to live up to their ideal or ought selves. In Studies 2 and 3, we elicited the regrets of participants of different ages and demographic categories, and examined whether they tended to involve actual–ideal or actual–ought discrepancies. Then, in Studies 4 and 5, we explored our proposed mechanism for the prominence of ideal-related regrets in people's lives—that people are quicker to

take steps to deal with their ought-related regrets than their ideal-related regrets. Finally, in Study 6, we examine whether this difference in coping strategies enables people to "put behind them" their ought-related regrets, while at the same time leaving them plagued by unresolved ideal-related regrets. For all studies reported here, we have reported all conditions and analyzed all dependent measures. No data were excluded from analyses except where noted.

## Study 1

### Method

**Participants.** One hundred one Mechanical Turk participants (63 females, $M_{age} = 36.30$) completed the study in exchange for modest monetary compensation.

**Materials and procedure.** Participants were presented with a description of regrets involving the ideal self and the ought self and indicated which they are more likely to regret. Specifically, participants were asked the following:

> In their lives, people often experience various regrets. Sometimes people regret not being the person they think they could have been. They regret not achieving the goals they had set for themselves, and not fulfilling their dreams and aspirations. Other times, people regret not being the person they think they should have been. They regret not meeting the norms and rules they had for themselves, and not fulfilling their obligations. Take a moment to think about what you regret most in life. When you think about your biggest life regrets, which do you tend to regret more?

Participants then indicated which regret they have experienced more often by selecting "I have more regrets about not being the person I think I could have been (goals I didn't achieve and dreams I didn't fulfill)" or "I have more regrets about not being the person I think I should have been (norms I didn't follow and obligations I didn't fulfill)."

### Results

As predicted, 73 of the 101 participants (72%) indicated that they have more regrets about not being the person they could have been (actual–ideal discrepancy) than not being the person they should have been (actual–ought discrepancy), $\chi^2(1) = 20.77$, $p < .0001$ (Cohen's $d = 1.02$). There were no significant age or gender effects.

These results thus support our main hypothesis: Participants said they regret their failures to live up to their ideal selves more than

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[2] People may even go as far as to physically harm themselves to reduce their guilt over ought-related regrets. Inbar, Pizarro, Gilovich, and Ariely (2013) found that participants inflicted more intense electric shocks on themselves after remembering a guilt-inducing event than a sadness-inducing event. And this strategy seems to be effective. Stronger self-inflicted shocks in their study were associated with less subsequent guilt.

[3] Given that self-discrepancy theory involves the subjective construal of one's actual, ideal, and ought selves (Higgins, 1987), and because these are psychologically complex constructs, there is a question of whether they can be accurately coded by observers. Indeed, the modest rate of agreement (75%) shows that our trained coders varied in their perceptions of ideal and ought selves. Thus, rather than relying on independent coders, in Studies 2 and 3 we relied on participants' own coding of their regrets.

their ought selves. However, it is possible that participants' abstract beliefs about the regrets they experience differ from those they actually feel. Introspecting about one's regrets is not the same as actually experiencing them. Therefore, in Studies 2 and 3, we asked participants to think about specific regrets they have experienced in their lives and then to indicate whether they relate more to their ideal or ought selves.

## Study 2

### Method

**Participants.**   One hundred forty-four Cornell University undergraduates (113 females, $M_{age} = 19.92$) completed the study in exchange for extra credit in their psychology and human development courses.

**Materials and procedure.**   Participants completed a questionnaire about "the psychology of regret." To reinforce the anonymity of their responses, participants were given an envelope in which they were instructed to insert their questionnaire and turn it in with the envelope sealed. On the questionnaire's first page, participants were asked: "When you look back on your life to this point, what are your biggest regrets? Please list as many as you can think of, and be as specific as you can without feeling that you are compromising your anonymity." Participants were then presented with five paragraph-length blank spaces in which to write their regrets. If they found the space insufficient, they were encouraged to use the back of the page.

Next, participants were presented with short descriptions of ideal and ought selves, as they pertain to people's regrets. Specifically, participants were told the following:

> There are several reasons why we may regret things in life. One reason for regretting something is that it distances us from our ideal self, our true potential and our ultimate goals. This kind of regret pushes us further away from who we want to ideally be—the person we dream about becoming. A second reason for regret is when we feel that it distances us from our ought self. This kind of regret pushes us further away from who we should be—the person we need to be.

For each of their regrets, participants specified whether it distanced them more from their ideal or ought self. Because a person's sense of self is, by definition, subjective, having participants code their own regrets guarantees they were coded according to participants' own values, goals, and beliefs. Finally, participants were debriefed and read a short paragraph assuring them that regret is a common and natural emotion.[4]

### Results

Overall, participants described 619 regrets, or an average of 4.29 per participant. Two regrets were (self-) coded as stemming from discrepancies from both the ideal and ought selves and one regret was left uncoded. These regrets were excluded from all analyses, leaving a final sample of 616 regrets.

As predicted, participants were significantly more likely to regret their failures to live up to their ideals than their failures to live up to their ought selves. Whereas 350 (57%) of the regrets were coded by participants as distancing them from their ideal selves, only 266 (43%) were coded as distancing them from their

ought selves, $\chi^2(1) = 11.49$, $p < .001$ (Cohen's $d = 0.27$). An analysis using participants as the unit of analysis (instead of individual regrets) yielded similar results: Of the participants who listed a majority of one type of regret, 89 (72%) listed a majority of regrets involving the ideal self and only 35 (28%) listed a majority involving the ought self, $\chi^2(1) = 24.32$, $p < .0001$. Thus, failures to live up to an ideal self tend to loom larger in people's regrets than failures to live up to an ought self.[5]

### Discussion

The results of Study 2 provide support for our hypothesis that failures to live up to one's ideals are more prominent in people's regrets than failures to live up to one's responsibilities. Participants reported being more prone to regret discrepancies between their actual and ideal selves than their actual and ought selves. Several cautions are in order, however. First, given that age affects the perceived discrepancy between one's actual and ideal self (Ryff, 1991), it is possible that the predominance of ideal-related regrets in Study 2 was specific to the relatively young sample. Young adults, who are only beginning to fulfill their goals and aspirations, may be especially likely to experience ideal-related regrets. Since there was little variance in participants' age in Study 2, we could not examine the effect of age on the nature of their regrets. Second, participants' affiliation with a highly selective academic institution may have affected the types of regrets they have experienced or the type of regrets that were salient at the time of the study. If enrolling at such an institution fulfilled participants' perceived duties and responsibilities (for the time being) more than it fit their ideal aspirations, it would stand to reason that they would have fewer ought-related regrets. Third, participants in Study 2 were asked to write about as many regrets as they wished. There are advantages to having them do so (including increased statistical power), but it leaves open the possibility that people might have fewer ought-related than ideal-related regrets and yet feel that their most significant or enduring life regret belongs to the former category. We therefore asked participants in Study 3 to write about their single, most significant life regret.

## Study 3

### Method

**Participants.**   One hundred three Mechanical Turk participants (55 females, $M_{age} = 34.76$) completed the study in exchange for modest monetary compensation.

**Materials and procedure.**   Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire on "the psychology of regret." On the first

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[4] After coding their regrets as either ideal-related or ought-related, participants in Studies 2 and 3 were also asked to indicate whether each of their regrets was one of action or inaction. Replicating previous research (Gilovich & Medvec, 1995), participants were significantly more likely to report regrets of inaction than regrets of action both in Study 2 ($N_{inaction} = 375$; 61%), ($N_{action} = 236$; 39%), $\chi^2(1) = 31.90$, $p < .0001$, and Study 3 ($N_{inaction} = 59$; 61%), ($N_{action} = 37$; 39%), $\chi^2(1) = 5.09$, $p = .024$.
[5] Participants in Study 2 also rated the extent to which their regrets affected other people (1 = *does not affect other people at all*, 5 = *affects other people to a great extent*). Action and ought-related regrets were seen as having a larger effect on others than did inaction and ideal-related regrets, respectively ($ts > 2.42$, $ps < .02$).

screen, participants were asked, "When you look back on your life to this point, what is your biggest regret? Please list this regret, and be as specific as you can without feeling that you are compromising your anonymity." Three questions were then used to assess the intensity of participants' regret: "How much regret do you feel about this?" (1 = *I feel minimal regret*, 7 = *I feel extreme regret*), "If you had an opportunity to act differently, to what extent would you choose to do so?" (1 = *I would have acted completely the same*, 7 = *I would have acted completely different*), and "If you could, how much would you want to go back and undo your regret?" (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much so*).

Participants were then asked to code their regrets. They were presented with definitions of ideal and ought selves, being informed that "a person's *ideal self* is everything he or she would want to ideally be—a person's ultimate goals, their dreams and aspirations, and who they are dreaming of becoming" and "a person's *ought self* is everything they think they should or ought to be—a person's beliefs about how they should behave, their duties and responsibilities, and the normative rules they believe they should follow." They were then asked to make the following dichotomous choice:

> Imagine you could go back to the time of your regret and undo it. How would undoing your regret change who you are? Would undoing the regret drive you closer to your ideal self or closer to your ought self?

Finally, participants were given a written debriefing that included a paragraph assuring them that regret is a common and natural emotion.

## Results

**Regret intensity.** Participants' responses to the three regret questions were averaged to create a composite measure of regret intensity (Cronbach's alpha = .89). Two participants did not write about any regrets, 2 wrote about regrets outside of their control (e.g., "I regret that my cousin passed away"), and 3 participants indicated that they felt minimal regret. Omitting these seven participants from the analyses resulted in a final sample of 96 participants. Overall, participants wrote about extremely significant regrets ($M_{regret}$ = 5.94, $SD$ = 1.09): 58% of participants rated their regret intensity as 6 or higher on the 7-point scale, and a full 34% rated their regret as the highest possible. It is thus safe to assume that participants completed the task in a serious manner and wrote about a significant life regret.

**Regret content.** Replicating Study 2, we found support for our main prediction: Participants were significantly more likely to regret not living up to what they could have been than not living up to what they should have been. Whereas 73 (76%) participants indicated that the regret they wrote about distanced them from their ideal selves, only 23 (24%) indicated that it distanced them from their ought selves, $\chi^2(1)$ = 27.37, $p$ < .0001 (Cohen's $d$ = 1.26). Age was not a significant predictor of the type of self-discrepancy at the core of participants' regrets.

## Studies 4 and 5

Studies 1 through 3 reveal an association between people's most common life regrets and the type of self-discrepancy they involve. People's most enduring life regrets tend to involve the person they

could have been (rather than should have been) but aren't. When asked to introspect about regrets in general (Study 1) or write about their most significant regrets in life (Studies 2–3), participants stated that their regrets are more likely to involve their ideal selves than their ought selves.

We have argued that, in addition to the cognitive-motivational mechanisms examined in prior research (e.g., Roese, Hur, & Pennington, 1999; Leder, Florack, & Keller, 2013), differences in how people cope with their regrets are responsible for the prominence of ideal self shortcomings in people's most enduring life regrets. That is, because failures to live up to one's ideal self do not elicit the same psychological and behavioral repair work as failures to live up to one's ought self, people have more enduring ideal-related regrets than ought-related regrets. Because of the sense of urgency that accompanies ought-related regrets, people are more likely to take active measures to dampen or counteract them (e.g., by "undoing" their past behavior, changing their future behavior, offering apologies to those who have been wronged, or treating the event as a learning opportunity; see Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007). In contrast, because failures to live up to one's ideal self do not seem as pressing and do not elicit this same feeling of urgency, people tend to put off dealing with these sorts of regrets.

We examine this idea in Studies 4 and 5. In Study 4, participants read scenarios involving people's failures to live up to their ideal and ought selves and rated the extent to which each regret would lead to behavioral and psychological repair work. We predicted that participants would judge ought-related regrets as more likely to elicit remedial action and activate coping mechanisms than ideal-related regrets. We then experimentally manipulated in Study 5 whether participants thought about their own ideal-related regrets or ought-related regrets and examined how they've dealt with these shortcomings. We predicted that participants who wrote about ought-related regrets would judge them to be more pressing than those who wrote about ideal-related regrets and, as a result, would report having engaged in more behavioral and psychological repair work to regulate their ought-related regrets than their ideal-related regrets.

## Study 4

### Method

**Participants.** One hundred five Mechanical Turk users (44 females, $M_{age}$ = 35.69) participated in this study in exchange for modest monetary compensation. Data from 6 participants who failed an attention check were omitted from analysis, although including them does not change the direction or significance of the results.

**Materials and procedure.** Participants were first presented with the following paragraph about mechanisms for coping with regret:

> People have different ways of coping with their regrets in life. Sometimes, people do not do much to deal with their regrets, letting them persist, maybe in the back of their minds, and never trying to psychologically come to terms with them. Other times, people actively try to deal with their regrets, either by thinking about the events differently, seeing a therapist that would help them come to terms with the regret, or taking direct action to dampen or cope with their regret. For example, people might treat the regret as a learning and growth

opportunity (it taught me a lot about myself and who I want to be), search for the silver lining (at least some good came out of this), treat the regret as an opportunity to make changes in the future (after this happened, I looked for ways to change my behavior), or do something to dampen the regret (I felt better after I . . .).

Participants were then presented, in random order, with 10 scenarios describing five typical ideal-related and five typical ought-related regrets. These scenarios were modeled after participants' actual regrets in Studies 2 and 3. For example, the scenarios described a person who regrets not having pursued his dream job (ideal-related), a person who regrets having worked too much when she was younger (ideal-related), a person who regrets having cheated on her spouse (ought-related), and a person who regrets not visiting a dying relative (ought-related; see the Appendix for a complete list).[6] Following each scenario, we asked participants whether they believed the protagonist would actively try to cope with his or her regret. Specifically, they were asked "to what extent do you believe that he/she will actively see it as a learning opportunity, search for the silver lining, treat it as an opportunity to make changes in the future, or do something to dampen his/her regret?" (1 = *very unlikely*, 4 = *neither likely nor unlikely*, 7 = *very likely*).

## Results

We argue that ideal-related regrets are more prominent in people's lives than ought-related regrets because people are more likely to attend to and try to come to terms with the latter than the former. Whereas ought-related regrets elicit the psychological repair work that is necessary to attenuate or eliminate psychological pain (e.g., searching for a silver lining, seeking professional therapy), ideal-related regrets less often activate the coping mechanisms that would otherwise dampen their intensity and shorten their duration and therefore tend to persist in the back of people's minds.

To test this hypothesis, we compared participants' responses to the five ideal-related and five ought-related regrets. As predicted, the ought-related regrets were judged as more likely to elicit psychological and behavioral repair work than the ideal-related regrets. Participants indicated that people are more likely to attend to, and try to deal with, regrets involving infidelity ($M = 5.15$, $SD = 1.88$), rebellious adolescence ($M = 5.51$, $SD = 1.40$), not visiting a dying relative ($M = 4.82$, $SD = 1.88$), not keeping a secret ($M = 5.17$, $SD = 1.48$), and not helping a person in need ($M = 5.11$, $SD = 1.59$) than regrets involving missed travel opportunities ($M = 4.51$, $SD = 1.66$), forsaken dreams ($M = 4.79$, $SD = 1.62$), romantic interests not pursued ($M = 4.48$, $SD = 1.69$), working too much ($M = 4.38$, $SD = 1.56$), and neglected musical aspirations ($M = 4.23$, $SD = 1.39$). Overall, ought-related regrets ($M = 5.15$, $SD = 1.02$, 95% CI [4.95, 5.35]) were significantly more likely than ideal-related regrets ($M = 4.48$, $SD = 1.01$, 95% CI [4.28, 4.68]) to be seen as a learning opportunity, a chance to make life changes, or an occasion to search for silver linings, paired $t(98) = 5.71$, $p < .0001$ (Cohen's $d = 0.66$).

## Study 5

Participants in Study 4 anticipated that people plagued by ought-related regrets would engage in more psychological repair work

and ameliorative action than those beset by ideal-related regrets. In Study 5, we examined whether people would report having actually done so more for their own ought-related than ideal-related regrets. In addition, in Study 4 participants simply indicated the extent to which people plagued by ought-related and ideal-related regrets would engage in psychological and behavioral repair work, without specifying the types of repair strategies they thought people would be likely to pursue. In Study 5, we asked participants to indicate how likely they would be to employ seven different specific coping strategies.

## Method

**Participants.** Ninety-eight Mechanical Turk participants (64 females, $M_{age} = 32.76$) completed the study in exchange for modest monetary compensation.

**Materials and procedure.** We manipulated the type of regret participants wrote about by randomly assigning participants to focus on either their hopes and aspirations (i.e., ideal self) or their duties and obligations (i.e., ought self; Higgins, Roney, Crowe, & Hymes, 1994). In the ideal self condition, participants were asked to write about their aspirations in life:

> For this task, we would like you think about your hopes and aspirations in life. What is something you dream about? What do you aspire to do in life? What things would you like to ideally accomplish in your lifetime? Please take a moment to think about your life dreams - the things that you ideally want to achieve. These dreams can involve both concrete things you aspire to achieve (e.g., master a hobby or a musical instrument, learn a new language, or travel overseas) or more abstract and general things (e.g., pursue your dream career).

These participants were then asked to write about a regret related to their ideal self. Specifically, they were asked to write about

> a time when you *failed* to make progress toward one of these dreams. Have you ever felt like you have failed yourself in regards to your aspirations? Can you think of something you regret doing that involves one of these dreams? Alternatively, can you think of something you regret *not* doing that involves one of these dreams?

In the ought self condition, participants were asked to write about their responsibilities in life:

> For this task, we would like you think about your duties and obligations in life. What are your current responsibilities? What are the things that you think you ought to be doing with your life? What responsibilities or expectations do you think you ought to fulfill in your life? Please take a moment to think about your duties in life - the rules and morals that you ought to follow. These responsibilities can be both concrete things that you think you ought to do (e.g., help people in need, remain faithful to your partner, or stay sober) or more abstract and general things (e.g., lead an honest life).

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[6] Because regrets of action tend to elicit more behavioral and psychological repair work than regrets of inaction (Gilovich & Medvec, 1995; van der Pligt, Zeelenberg, & Manstead, 1998), we made sure to include an equal number of each regret type in the ideal-related and ought-related scenarios.

These participants were then asked to write about a regret relating to their ought self. Specifically, they were asked to write about

> a time when you *failed* to fulfill one of these duties or responsibilities. Have you ever felt like you have failed yourself in regards to the duties you ought to do? Can you think of something that you regret doing that involves one of these responsibilities? Alternatively, can you think of something you regret *not* doing that involves one of these responsibilities?

We then asked all participants about how they have dealt with (or are currently dealing with) the regrets they wrote about. First, participants were asked how urgently they felt they needed to deal with their regret. They were told that some regrets

> don't seem very urgent, and people don't do much to deal with them. Instead, people just let their regrets persist, maybe in the back of their minds, and put them off to when they'll have 'time to deal with it.' Other times, regrets can seem very pressing and urgent, and people actively try to deal with them as soon as they can.

Participants rated the extent to which the regret they wrote about felt "like an urgent or pressing regret that you had to deal with versus something you can put off to a later time" (1 = *it didn't feel urgent at all*, 7 = *it felt very urgent*).[7]

We then asked participants about the specific psychological and behavioral repair work they'd engaged in to deal with their regret. Participants were told that

> sometimes, people don't do much to deal with their regrets, but simply live with them in the back of their minds. Other times, people take concrete actions to rectify the situation, reduce their regret, or learn to cope with it.

They were presented, in random order, with seven different coping mechanisms and were asked to indicate the extent to which they'd engaged in each one: "I tried to change my behavior following this regret"; "I tried to 'fix' or correct the situation"; "I tried to 'undo' my behavior that led to this regret"; "I turned to friends or family members to help me cope with this regret"; "I turned to religion to help me cope with this regret"; "I looked for ways to justify my behavior to myself and/or other people"; and "I looked for silver linings in the situation, like valuable lessons I've learned or unforeseen positive consequences I've experienced due to this regret" (1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *somewhat disagree*, 3 = *neither agree nor disagree*, 4 = *somewhat agree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). Finally, participants were given a written debriefing that included a paragraph stating that regret is a common and natural emotion.

## Results

Two participants who failed to write about a regret and 3 who wrote about events outside of their control were excluded from analysis, leaving a final sample of 93 participants. However, including these participants in the analysis does not change the direction or the significance of any of the results reported.

**Regret urgency.** We predicted that participants would feel more of a pressing need to deal with their ought-related regrets than their ideal-related regrets. Indeed, participants who wrote about a time when they'd failed to fulfill their duties and obliga-

tions felt that their regrets were significantly more urgent ($M = 4.85$, $SD = 1.65$, 95% CI [4.37, 5.34]) than those who wrote about an incident in which they'd failed to fulfill their dreams or aspirations ($M = 4.13$, $SD = 1.83$, 95% CI [3.59, 4.67]), $t(91) = 1.99$, $p < .05$, (Cohen's $d = 0.41$). Thus, whereas participants' ought-related regrets required their immediate attention, their ideal-related regrets were more likely to be put off to a later time.

**Psychological and behavioral repair work.** We predicted that the sense of urgency participants feel about their regrets would translate to increased psychological and/or behavioral repair work. Indeed, responses to five of the seven repair measures were positively correlated with the feeling that the regret is urgent—significantly so for four of them. The more urgently participants felt they should deal with their regrets, the more they reported having tried to change their behavior ($\beta = 0.53$), $t(92) = 6.00$, $p < .0001$, rectify the situation ($\beta = 0.53$), $t(92) = 5.95$, $p < .0001$, "undo" the behavior that had led them to experience the regret in the first place ($\beta = 0.41$), $t(92) = 4.29$, $p < .0001$, or turn to friends and family for support ($\beta = 0.34$), $t(92) = 3.50$, $p < .0001$. In addition, the more participants felt pressed to deal with a regret, the more they reported seeking support through religion ($\beta = 0.16$), although this was not significant, $t(92) = 1.56$, $p = .12$.

We next examined whether participants reported having taken more steps to cope with their ought-related regrets than their ideal-related regrets. To do so, we analyzed each coping mechanism individually and used Bonferroni's method to correct for multiple comparisons, setting the alpha level at $p = .007$. We predicted that participants would be more likely to report having engaged in a given coping strategy to deal with their ought-related regrets than their ideal-related regrets. This was indeed the case for three of the seven strategies. Participants who wrote about a regret related to their duties and responsibilities were significantly more likely to report having tried to change their behavior ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 0.85$, 95% CI [3.94, 4.44]), rectify the situation ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 0.96$, 95% CI [3.82, 4.39]), or "undo" it entirely ($M = 3.43$, $SD = 1.12$, 95% CI [3.10, 3.75]) than did those who wrote about a regret related to their dreams and aspirations ($M_{change} = 3.39$, $SD = 1.18$, 95% CI [3.04, 3.74]; $M_{rectify} = 3.50$, $SD = 1.11$, 95% CI [3.17, 3.83]; $M_{undo} = 2.72$, $SD = 1.22$, 95% CI [2.35, 3.08]), $ts > 2.82$, $ps < .006$). In addition, participants were more likely to report having turned to friends and family members for help coping with their ought-related regrets ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 1.50$, 95% CI [2.77, 3.65]) than their ideal-related regrets ($M = 2.80$, $SD = 1.34$, 95% CI [2.41, 3.20]), although this difference was not statistically significant, $t(91) = 1.38$, $p = .17$. Finally, there was no difference in the extent to which participants reported having turned to religion ($M_{ought-regret} = 2.32$; $M_{ideal-related} = 2.43$), justified their behavior ($M_{ought-regret} = 3.49$; $M_{ideal-related} = 3.39$), or searched for the silver linings in their regret ($M_{ought-regret} = 3.53$; $M_{ideal-related} = 3.72$).

We used the SPSS PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2013) to examine whether the initial urgency of ought-related regrets mediated the observed between-condition difference on a composite measure of

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[7] It is important to note that judgments of regret urgency were made in retrospect (of course) and may therefore be susceptible to various memory biases. That being said, we had no a priori reason to expect recollections of urgency to be more biased for either ought- or ideal-related regrets.

the seven coping strategies. A bootstrap analysis of the significance of the indirect effect of regret type on participants' reported coping efforts through regret urgency yielded a 95% CI that did not contain 0 (ß = 0.13, 95% CI = [0.010, 0.299]). Furthermore, the direct effect of regret type on reported coping in this model was not significant (ß = 0.20, *p* = .10), indicating that regret urgency fully mediated the relationship between regret type and coping. In other words, participants who wrote about ought-related regrets reported a higher likelihood of actively trying to cope with their regrets, and this difference was due, in part, to the fact that these regrets were initially more painful (see Figure 1).

Another way of looking at the influence of regret type on participants' coping efforts is to examine the number of coping strategies they reported having engaged in, rather than their likelihood of engaging in each strategy. Do ought-related regrets prompt people to engage in a greater number of distinct coping behaviors? To test this possibility, we counted the number of items on which participants reported they *somewhat agree* or *strongly agree*. As anticipated, the more pressing and urgent the regret, the more strategies participants reported they had engaged in to mitigate it (β = 0.45), *t*(92) = 4.83, *p* < .0001. More important, we again found that ought-related regrets led to more reported psychological and behavioral repair work than ideal related-regrets. Participants who wrote about their failures to live up to their ought self reported having engaged in significantly more ways of coping (*M* = 4.49, *SD* = 1.41, 95% CI [4.07, 4.90]) than those who wrote about their failures to live up to their ideal self (*M* = 3.50, *SD* = 1.75, 95% CI [2.98, 4.02]), *t*(91) = 3.01, *p* = .003 (Cohen's *d* = 0.62).

## Study 6

The results of Studies 4 and 5 indicate that because ought-related regrets initially feel more intense and urgent than ideal-related regrets, people are more likely to engage in behavioral and psychological coping efforts to deal with them. Having shown that people report engaging in more coping strategies for dealing with their ought-related regrets than their ideal-related regrets, we now turn to the second proposition of our argument—that the *outcome* of this difference in active coping efforts causes ideal-related regrets to endure longer and become more prominent in people's minds.

Given the pragmatic difficulties involved in running extensive longitudinal studies of the efficacy of behavioral coping efforts, it is not surprising that research has focused on the efficacy of psychological coping mechanisms (for a review, see Zeelenberg &

Pieters, 2007). Still, the idea that people can effectively cope with their regrets by engaging in "behavioral repair work" is a cornerstone of cognitive-behavioral therapy (e.g., Freeman & DeWolf, 1989) and is both theoretically and empirically grounded. Dating back to early work on postdecisional regret, it has been argued that given the opportunity to do so, a person experiencing regret "should show some inclination to reverse his decision" (p. 99; Festinger, 1964; see also Zeelenberg & Beattie, 1997; Zeelenberg, Inman, & Pieters, 2001; Zeelenberg & Pieters, 1999). And empirical research supports the idea that various forms of behavioral coping—changing one's behavior, undoing past decisions, expressing remorse, turning to friends and family for support, and so forth—can be effective in regret regulation. In an examination of midlife regrets, Stewart and Vandewater (1999) found that people who deal with their regrets by making major life changes (e.g., going back to school, starting a new career) experience better physical health and greater psychological well-being (decreased depression, reduced rumination, and increased life satisfaction) than those who fail to make such changes. More recently, researchers have examined the effects of smaller-scale behavioral efforts to regulate the intensity of regret. It has been found, for example, that people who are motivated to "try to redo" or "make an effort to change" a regretted decision report lower regret intensity than those who lack such motivation (Bjälkebring, Västfjäll, & Johansson, 2013; Bjälkebring, Västfjäll, Svenson, & Slovic, 2016). Also, when changing their behavior may be difficult or impossible, people often turn to their friends and family for emotional support, thus promoting and strengthening their social relationships, a significant predictor of well-being and coping (Graham, Huang, Clark, & Helgeson, 2008; Summerville & Buchanan, 2014).

Of course, it is possible that the preponderance of ideal-related regrets in people's minds may be due to something other than their tendency to elicit less extensive early efforts at coping. It could be due, for example, to initial differences in the prevalence of ideal-related regrets rather than to differences in attenuation of the two regret types. If people simply have more ideal-related regrets than ought-related regrets to begin with, then it is not surprising they report more unresolved ideal-related regrets.

We do not believe that to be the case. Instead, we propose that the preponderance of long-lasting ideal-related regrets is the result of the greater attrition of ought-related regrets due to the efforts devoted to coping with them. After having established in Studies 4 and 5 that people are more likely to deal with their ought-related regrets than their ideal-related regrets, in Study 6 we test this proposition from the opposite direction by examining whether the regrets people have successfully coped with differ from the regrets people have yet to put aside. Specifically, we examined the prevalence of ideal- and ought-related regrets among participants' resolved regrets (i.e., regrets they were able to successfully deal with and put aside) and their unresolved regrets (i.e., regrets that continue to be bothersome). We predicted that as people attempt to deal actively with their failures to live up to their ought selves, their painful recollections shift from "unfinished business" to a less prominent mental file drawer of regrets they have moved beyond. In contrast, because people are less inclined to deal actively with their failures to live up to their ideal selves, those failures are less likely to be put away or tagged as resolved. Ironically, because they are less likely to elicit behavioral and psychological efforts at amelioration, ideal-related regrets are
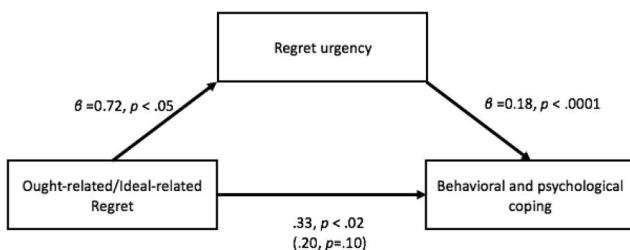


*Figure 1.* The mediating role of regret urgency on the relationship between regret type and coping behavior in Study 5.

more likely to remain as "unfinished business" and endure longer in people's minds.[8]

We examined this proposition in Study 6. We asked participants to recall a regret they have either coped with successfully ("a closed book") or a regret they have yet to deal with and is still active psychologically ("unfinished business"). We then asked them whether the regret was related to their ideal self or their ought self. We predicted that because ideal-related regrets are less likely to elicit behavioral and psychological coping efforts, ideal-related regrets would be more likely to come to mind when thinking of unresolved rather than resolved regrets. In contrast, because people are more apt to deal with their ought-related regrets, we predicted that ought-related regrets would be more likely to come to mind when thinking of regrets tagged as "a closed book" than as "unfinished business."

## Method

**Participants.** One hundred fifty-seven Mechanical Turk participants (87 females, $M_{age} = 32.66$) completed the study in exchange for modest monetary compensation.

**Materials and procedure.** Participants were randomly assigned to write about either a regret that is still active in their minds ("unfinished business") or a regret that they have successfully dealt with in the past ("closed book"). In the unfinished business condition, participants were asked the following:

> Sometimes, people cannot "let go of" their regrets, feeling like the regret cannot be "put to rest." They keep thinking about how their lives could have ended up completely different had they acted differently. Such regrets feel like "unfinished business"—something people still want to deal with or take care of. When you think about your life to this point, can you think of a regret that still feels like "unfinished business"? For example, can you think of something you regret that you still haven't been able to completely resolve or change?

In the closed book condition, participants were asked the following:

> Sometimes, people successfully deal with their regrets and "move on," feeling that the regret can be "put to rest." This happens when people feel that they have done all that they could to fix the situation, change their behavior, make amends, or learn from their past mistakes. Such regrets feel like "a closed book"—something people have dealt with and let go of. When you think about your life to this point, can you think of something you regretted in the past but then dealt with, and which now feels like "a closed book"? For example, can you think of something you regretted but then led you to make changes to your behavior or your life circumstances?

After writing about their resolved or unresolved regrets, participants read a description of an ideal-self ("everything they would want to ideally be—their goals, dreams, and aspirations in life") and an ought-self ("everything they think they should or ought to be—their responsibilities to themselves and to other people, their duties, and their beliefs about what they should and shouldn't do") and were asked to indicate which of the two descriptions best fit the regret they wrote about. Participants were then debriefed and asked to read a short paragraph assuring them that regret is a common and natural emotion.

## Results

Four participants who failed to write about a regret and seven who wrote about events outside of their control were excluded from analysis, leaving a final sample of 146. Including these participants in the analysis does not change the direction or the significance of any of the results reported.

We predicted that because people are more inclined to deal with their ought-related than their ideal-related regrets, participants would be more likely to write about a failure to live up to their ought self rather than their ideal self when asked to consider a resolved regret, but more likely to write about a failure to live up to their ideal self than their ought self when asked to consider an unresolved regret. This was indeed the case. Whereas only 22 (31%) of the 72 regrets in the "closed book" condition were ideal-related regrets, 43 (58%) of the 74 regrets in the "unfinished business" condition were ideal-related. Overall, participants were more likely to bring to mind ideal-related than ought-related regrets when thinking of their "unfinished business," but were more likely to think of ought-related than ideal-related regrets when thinking of the regrets they have successfully resolved and dealt with, $\chi^2(1) = 11.38$, $p = .0007$ (see Figure 2).

## General Discussion

What do people regret most in life? Building on self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987), we found that people of different ages and diverse demographics regret their failures to live up to their ideal selves more than their failures to live up to their ought selves. In Study 1, participants explicitly stated that they more often regret the things they could have done than the things they should have done. In Studies 2 and 3, participants indicated that their regrets were more likely to involve discrepancies from their ideal selves than their ought selves.

Why do actual-ideal discrepancies spark such enduring regret? As we found in Studies 4 and 5, failures to act on one's ideals do not elicit the same behavioral and psychological coping efforts as failures to act on one's "oughts" or "shoulds." Both when they were asked about other people's regrets (Study 4) and when they were asked about their own ideal-related and ought-related regrets

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[8] It is important to note that our account emphasizes the continuing salience of regrets related to the ideal self, more than their intensity. As people come to terms with their ought-related regrets, they are able to attain "closure" and think of them less often. Nevertheless, when prompted to bring these regrets to mind (as participants in Study 6 were asked to do), these memories may still remain emotionally intense. Indeed, as a participant in Study 6 stated,

> I have come to accept that episode as an unfortunate period of self-realization and "growing up"—still I must honestly say that I regret it, and if I had my life to live over I would not do it again.

At times, people may avoid "re-visiting" their resolved ought-related regrets, as indicated by one telling remark by another participant:

> I think back and it's a closed book from my past that I would rather not visit the memories again.

Thus, although ought-related regrets can be as emotionally intense as ideal-related regrets (or even more so), the fact that they are brought to mind less often renders them less bothersome.
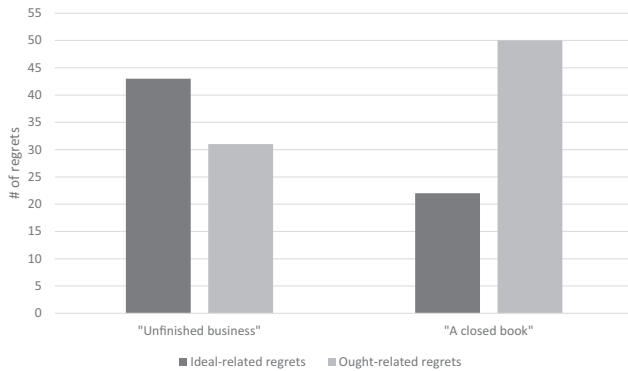
*Figure 2.* The number of ideal- and ought-related regrets considered unresolved ("unfinished business") versus resolved ("a closed book").

(Study 5), participants indicated that regrets related to duties, obligations, and responsibilities (rather than hopes, dreams, and aspirations) are more likely to lead to behavioral and psychological repair work.[9] And, as shown in Study 6, this difference in coping effort leads to differences in the mental salience of the two types of regret. Because people are more likely to take steps to ameliorate regrets related to their ought selves than their ideal selves, ought-related regrets are more likely to be filed away as resolved and thereby seem less bothersome with time. Ideal-related regrets, in contrast, linger on and "attain a peculiar longevity" in people's minds (Gilbert et al., 2004).

## Additional Mechanisms and Further Research

As with many complex psychological phenomena, the asymmetry between people's ideal- and ought-related regrets is likely to be the product of several mechanisms working together. We described one such mechanism—a pronounced difference in the activation of coping efforts—and provided evidence supporting its influence. But there are three other reasons that may help to explain why discrepancies from the ideal self tend to be such a prominent part of the landscape of regret.

First, people's ideal selves may simply be less attainable than their ought selves (Brendl & Higgins, 1996; Freitas, Liberman, Salovey, & Higgins, 2002; Idson, Liberman, & Higgins, 2000). People sometimes have unattainable dreams and set unrealistic aspirations for themselves, guaranteeing continued discrepancies between who they perceive themselves to be and who they ideally want to become. Even when they meet their more realistic aspirations, they often develop new ones that are harder to meet (Binswanger, 2006; Brickman, Coates, & Janoff-Bulman, 1978). That is not the case for duties and responsibilities. People who fulfill their duties are less likely to feel compelled to establish more stringent ones they now feel they have to meet (Dawes, 1994). As a result, people's perceived duties and responsibilities may be more attainable and more stable. It is not difficult to imagine, then, how the constant chase after a series of ever-increasing aspirations may lead to more regrets over falling short of the ideal self. Because the higher the hope, the bigger the disappointment (van Dijk, Zeelenberg, & van der Pligt, 2003), a less attainable ideal self may be a recipe for lifelong regret.

Second, unlike their ought selves, people's ideal selves are more likely to be guided by abstract values than concrete behavioral restrictions (Pennington & Roese, 2003). And since ample choice is associated with greater counterfactual thinking and more intense regret (Schwartz, 2004), a more abstract (and hence less restrictive) ideal self lends itself to more ideal-related regrets. By the same token, the more restrictive nature of the ought self should serve to reduce people's ought-related regrets. When one's ought self largely consists of a set of restrictions, all it takes to prevent regret is to avoid actions that violate them.[10] That being said, the possibility that ideal-related regrets arise from more abstract and therefore less attainable goals cannot fully account for the fact that participants in Study 6 reported experiencing more resolved ought-related regrets than ideal-related regrets. Thus, although the relative abstractness of an aspiration or obligation may influence the intensity and durability of the regret that comes from failing to achieve or fulfill it, it cannot fully explain our pattern of results.

Finally, people may be more likely to have ideal-related than ought-related regrets because the ideal self is less context-dependent than the ought self. Different social settings activate different social norms—what a person should or shouldn't do (Cialdini, 1993). A behavior that is completely acceptable or encouraged in one context may be unsuitable or even taboo in another. Many situations require people to help those in need, for example, but extending help to a fellow student during an exam will lead to a slap on the wrist (or worse), not a pat on the back. Thus, unlike falling short of one's ideal self, the feeling that one has failed to live up to the ought self is dependent on the obligations associated with the prevailing context. Yet, precisely because they are more context-dependent, failures to fulfill duties and responsibilities may be activated relatively infrequently—largely confined to specific, context-dependent situations. On the other hand, because failures to live up to the ideal self are less context-dependent, they may be activated more often, become cognitively accessible across various contexts and situations, and play a larger role in people's most enduring regrets (Savitsky et al., 1997).

What happens when the surrounding context serves as a frequent reminder of a person's failure to live up to the ought self? Following the logic laid out above, we would expect such circumstances to increase the salience of people's ought-related regrets. We tested this prediction with a specific population that is reminded of their ought-related failures on a daily basis: prisoners. Forty-two prisoners incarcerated in an all-male, maximum security prison in New York state were asked to write about their biggest regrets in life. These regrets were then given to seven coders

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[9] It is important to note that in Study 5 we found a significant difference in reported behavioral repair work only. Although it may be the case that ought-related regrets lead to more behavioral, but not more psychological, repair work, we are unwilling to jump to such a conclusion based on those data. Given the limits of introspection, participants may have simply been unaware of the (mainly unconscious) psychological coping mechanisms they had engaged in, such as rationalizing or reducing dissonance over their past decisions. Participants may have been much more aware of their more conscious behavioral repair efforts.

[10] Indeed, whereas the majority of the Ten Commandments (arguably the Western world's most famous list of "oughts") focus on concrete things one should and shouldn't do, the advice given in self-help books (like Carnegie, 1936) typically focuses on broad (and abstract) categories of actions to be taken.

recruited from Mechanical Turk who were also given short descriptions of ideal and ought selves and asked to indicate whether each regret related to the former or the latter ($\alpha = .63$).[11] We found that the prisoners' regrets mainly involved failures to live up to their duties and responsibilities ($N = 68$; 68%) rather than their goals and aspirations ($N = 32$; 32%), $\chi^2(1) = 13.26$, $p < .0005$. Although there are obvious differences between this sample and the general population, these findings provide some initial support for the importance of contextual factors in shaping the nature of people's regrets.

## Relation to Past Research

Seta, McElroy, and Seta (2001) and Camacho, Higgins, and Luger (2003) both argued that people are more likely to regret failures to fulfill their promotion goals than their prevention goals when thinking of the distal (rather than proximal) past. Neither examined their contention empirically and our work is the first to show that people's most prominent life regrets more often involve failures to live up to their ideal self than their ought self.

That said, a couple of important differences between our findings and previous theorizing should be noted. First, both Seta et al., (2001) and Camacho et al., (2003) emphasized that the preponderance of promotion-goal regrets should be limited to individuals' reflections on distal past events. But we find evidence for the effect even among young college students (Study 2) whose regrets involve proximal past events. In addition, our failure to find any effect of participants' age in our data is also hard to square with an account that prioritizes temporal distance, as older participants have more distal past events to reflect on than younger participants (Pennington & Roese, 2003).

A second important difference between the present work and the positions advanced by Seta et al. (2001) and Camacho et al. (2003) is that we offer a completely different mechanism to account for the prominence of ideal-related regrets in people's lives. Rather than drawing on the motivational implications of regulatory fit (Higgins, 1998) or the association between regulatory fit and counterfactual thinking (Roese, Hur, & Pennington, 1999), we focus on the differential activation of coping mechanisms and compensatory actions that ideal-related and ought-related failures tend to inspire. We find that the prominence of ideal-related regrets is at least partly due to how people react to and cope with the two types of regret, not whether they are promotion or prevention focused. Thus, our work is the first to document the role played by behavioral and psychological coping mechanisms in people's tendency to regret their failures to live up to their ideal selves.

That said, our account and prior work that focuses on the cognitive and motivational concomitants of regulatory fit are not mutually exclusive. It is possible that the tendency to engage in subtractive counterfactuals following ought-related regrets (e.g., if only I hadn't done that, if only things had turned out differently, etc.; Roese, Hur, & Pennington, 1999) increases the perceived urgency of such regrets, and therefore increases people's tendency to engage in psychological and behavioral repair work. Furthermore, because people differ in the extent to which they are promotion- or prevention-focused (Higgins, Shah, & Friedman, 1997), they may also differ in their ability to cope with ideal-related and ought-related regrets. The more prominently one's ought-self looms in one's self-perception, the more noxious and

urgent deviations from this ought-self are likely to feel. Similarly, the association between regulatory fit and construal level (Lee, Keller, & Sternthal, 2009; Pennington & Roese, 2003) may also lead people to engage in more regulation of their ought-related regrets. Because people tend to construe their prevention goals (related to their ought selves) in more concrete terms than their promotion goals (related to their ideal selves), their failures to meet their ought goals may be more concrete, salient, and pressing. Future research is likely to benefit from further examination of how the cognitive, motivational, and behavioral aspects of regret regulation interact to reduce the intensity of ought-related regrets.

## Age and Ideal-Related Regrets

Ryff (1991) found that the distance between people's actual and ideal selves diminishes with age. We therefore expected age to play a moderating role in the predominance of ideal-related regrets in participants' lives. But we were surprised to find that age did not moderate any of our findings: older participants were as likely to experience ideal-related regrets as younger participants.

There are several reasons why age may not have moderated the nature of participants' regrets. First, our sample may not have included a sufficient number of very old participants. The oldest group of participants in Ryff's studies (1991) had a mean age of 73.4, whereas only two participants in Studies 1 through 3 were older than 70. Second, as we found in Studies 4 and 5, people are less likely to take ameliorative action to deal with ideal-related regrets because they feel less urgent and pressing initially. However, as people get older, the window of opportunity to do so often narrows considerably. As our opening quote conveys, the passage of time closes off opportunities, making people less able to make the changes necessary to undo their ideal-related regrets. Indeed, in Study 5 we found some evidence that age was negatively related to coping with ideal-related regrets but not ought-related regrets. The older participants were, the less likely they were to have tried to change their behavior ($\beta = -0.36$, $t(45) = 2.52$, $p = .02$) or "undo" their past actions ($\beta = -0.36$, $t(45) = 2.55$, $p = .02$) following an ideal-related regret. There was no such relationship between age and changes to current behavior ($\beta = 0.23$, $t(46) = 1.61$, $p = .12$) or undoing past actions ($\beta = 0.10$, $t(46) < 1$, $ns$) for ought-related regrets.

## Conclusion

Given the prominence of ideal-related regrets in people's lives, should people be encouraged to relentlessly pursue their dreams and aspirations? Although it might be tempting to make such a recommendation, caution is in order. A tendency to seize the moment can bring both benefits and misfortune, and whether people should cultivate such a disposition depends, in part, on what they are trying to achieve. A person who places a lot of weight on her ought self would be wise to minimize her regrets by thinking twice before forging ahead. However, if one is an adventurous soul guided by her ideal self, she might indeed end up happier by seizing the day and not looking back. As we have

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[11] A regret was coded as ought-related if it was perceived as related to the ought self by the majority of coders and as ideal-related if it was perceived by the majority of coders as related to the ideal self.

shown in this research, a person focused on her ideal self is more likely to lose sleep over her "wouldas" and "couldas" than her "shouldas."

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(*Appendix follows*)

**Appendix**

**Ideal-Related and Ought-Related Regret Scenarios (Study 4)**

| Regret type | Regret | Anecdote |
|---|---|---|
| Ideal self related | Unpursued musical aspirations | Growing up, Michael used to play the piano. But as he got older, time and money constraints got in the way, and he found himself giving this hobby up. Nowadays, he regrets having sold his piano. Every time Michael sees a talented musician, he wonders why he had sold it and whether that could have been him on stage if he had kept it. |
| Ideal self related | Working too much (unfulfilled youth) | Michelle is a manager at a successful company. When she was just starting out, she had to work long hours, and didn't have a lot of time off. Looking back at the beginning of her career, she regrets working too much and not striking a work-life balance early on. Every time Michelle sees young, carefree people, she wonders why she worked so hard and didn't have more fun when she was younger. |
| Ideal self related | Missed travel opportunities | After college, Michael's friend invited him to tag along on a backpacking trip in Europe. Although he wanted to go, money and time constraints got in the way and he ended up not going. He now deeply regrets not seizing on the opportunity to travel when he had the chance. Every time Michael sees a movie with young people traveling in Europe, he thinks about what he missed and wonders how his life may have been different had he traveled to Europe when he had the chance. |
| Ideal self related | Unpursued dreams | Michael has always been very creative and dreamed of becoming an artist. However, when he was in college, Michael's family pressured him to get a "real job," leading him to forsake his artistic aspirations. Nowadays, he regrets not having pursued his passions. Michael often finds himself sitting at his desk job, wondering how life would have been different had he chosen to follow his heart and work toward his dream. |
| Ideal self related | Unpursued romantic interests | When she was younger, Michelle had a romantic crush. She used to fantasize about this person, and felt that he may be "the one," her true love. But, because she was too shy to tell him how she felt, she never confessed her love. Now, she deeply regrets never expressing her interest to this "one who got away." Michelle often wonders how her life would have shaped out if she had told this person how she felt, and regrets not doing so |
| Ought self related | Cheating | Michelle has been married for a few years. Last winter, at an office party, she had a one night stand with a co-worker. She now deeply regrets having cheated on her spouse. Every time she thinks about it, she feels guilty and ashamed, and wonders why she did it. |
| Ought self related | A rebellious adolescence | Michael was a rebellious teenager. Growing up, he did a lot of drugs and drank too much alcohol. Looking back at his adolescence, he regrets many of the things he did when he was high, such as how he treated his friends and how he gave his parents such a hard time. Every time he sees a picture of himself from high school, he feels great remorse over who he was and what he did, and he wonders whether his life would have been different if he hadn't been so foolishly rebellious. |
| Ought self related | Not visiting a dying relative | Because of the nature of his work, Michael travels a lot for business. When Michael's grandmother was dying, he wasn't there at her side. He now deeply regrets not having seen his grandmother one last time to say goodbye. Every time Michael thinks about his grandmother, he wonders what it would have been like to be at her side during her last moments. |
| Ought self related | Not keeping a secret | Michael prides himself on knowing how to keep a secret. However, a few years ago, he broke a friend's trust when he shared a secret of his with others. He now deeply regrets sharing this friend's secret, and wishes he hadn't done so. Every once in a while, Michael thinks back to the time he shared this secret, and wonders why he had done so. |
| Ought self related | Not helping person in need | Michelle works in New York City. One day, coming back from work, she saw a person lying on the sidewalk. Michelle couldn't tell for sure if the person was in trouble or simply inebriated, and instead of asking whether he needed her help she kept walking. She now deeply regrets not having helped the man. Every once in a while, she thinks back to this incident and wonders why she didn't help. |