

6 Steps to Turn Regret Into Self-Improvement

Stop beating yourself up, and turn your emotions into action.

By Jennifer Taitz

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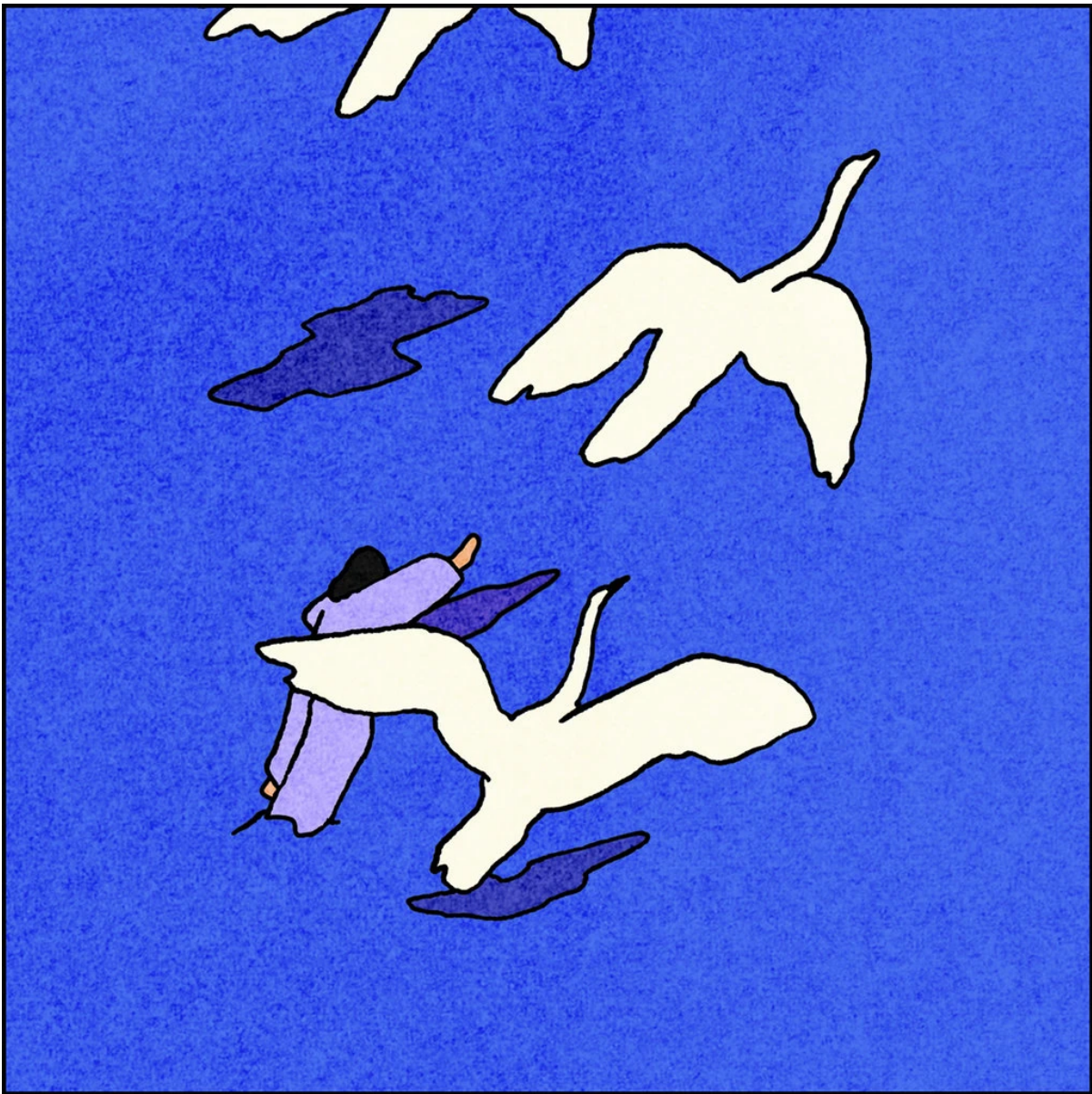
Have you ever felt like life would be *better* if you had taken a different path? If only you had pursued that job, ended that relationship sooner or moved to a new city, everything would be just perfect.

Nonsense, of course. But it's human nature to linger on those feelings of regret. We tend to look back and think that missed opportunities — real or imagined — could have set us on a different, possibly more rewarding path. Left unchecked, these emotions can become overwhelming sources of stress and anxiety.

But even painful emotions like regret can be powerful sources of inspiration. Whether you carry minor regrets that speak to your perfectionism, or you continuously cringe over more serious, “If only I ...” thoughts, it's possible to use regret as a lever to help you move ahead, rather than letting it weigh you down.

And there are good reasons for doing so. Researchers have found that obsessing over regrets has a negative impact on mood and sleep, it can increase impulsivity, and it be a risk factor for binge eating and misusing alcohol.

As a clinical psychologist, one of my most important tasks in helping people lead healthy, happy and meaningful lives is to teach them evidence-based strategies to manage their emotions. That includes how to use regrets to motivate them. I've found that even when people feel stuck in endless *what ifs*, it's possible to recalibrate. Here's how.



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Step 1: Evaluate how you cope with regret

Many of us try to push pain away. Others ruminate about perceived mistakes. But whether you ignore or fixate on what's troubling you, research has shown that it's impossible to run from emotions without consequences. And in a vicious twist, dodging upsetting feelings actually makes them even more present: Suppressing our emotions can diminish our capacity for joy and potentially manifest as physical pain.

So instead of trying to ignore your regrets, it's a better idea to practice acknowledging the experience. Try this: Start by slowing down and noticing your thoughts and sensations. Relax your face and hands, and think about accepting how you feel now without worrying you'll feel this way forever. Reaching this middle ground between avoiding and dwelling will prove less depressing.

This is easier said than done, but consider the alternative: A 2014 study published in *The Journal of General Psychology* found that drowning in regret can compromise our ability to make wise decisions, and focusing on those negative emotions “undermined performance” on simple tasks.

However, researchers also found that when people find a *silver lining* in their regret, they are able to think more clearly.

“Regret can be a problem, but one benefit of regret is that it signals improvement is possible,” said Neal Roese, a professor of marketing at the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University who focuses on the psychology of judgment and decision-making. “The trick is to avoid obsessing and pull out a lesson that can be applied in future situations.”

Further, when we find ourselves consumed by self-criticism, it can feel tempting to focus on quick fixes, like distracting ourselves, rather than taking steps to improve. And regrets that arise from inaction — i.e., missing opportunities — are particularly frustrating.

Take time to notice how you handled a recent regret. Did you pretend it meant less than it did? Or did you fall into a shame spiral? Once you figure out how you navigate these situations, you can start using your emotions to your advantage.



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Step 2: Interrupt your obsessing

Once you've identified how you cope, it's important to learn how to stop a regret spiral from happening, since thinking endlessly about it all but guarantees you'll feel worse.

Take a moment to list the consequences of a recent regret spiral — like circling for hours over a mistake you made — and keep those notes for review. Did you feel better? Worse? Were there concrete lessons you learned? Or did you just feel bad? The point of this list is to realize that these spirals probably won't lead you anywhere productive and, most likely, will leave you feeling stuck.

Next, think about the times you're most tempted to ruminate on your regrets, like right before you go to sleep. Having this list handy will help you keep in mind that it's wasted energy to focus on your regrets.

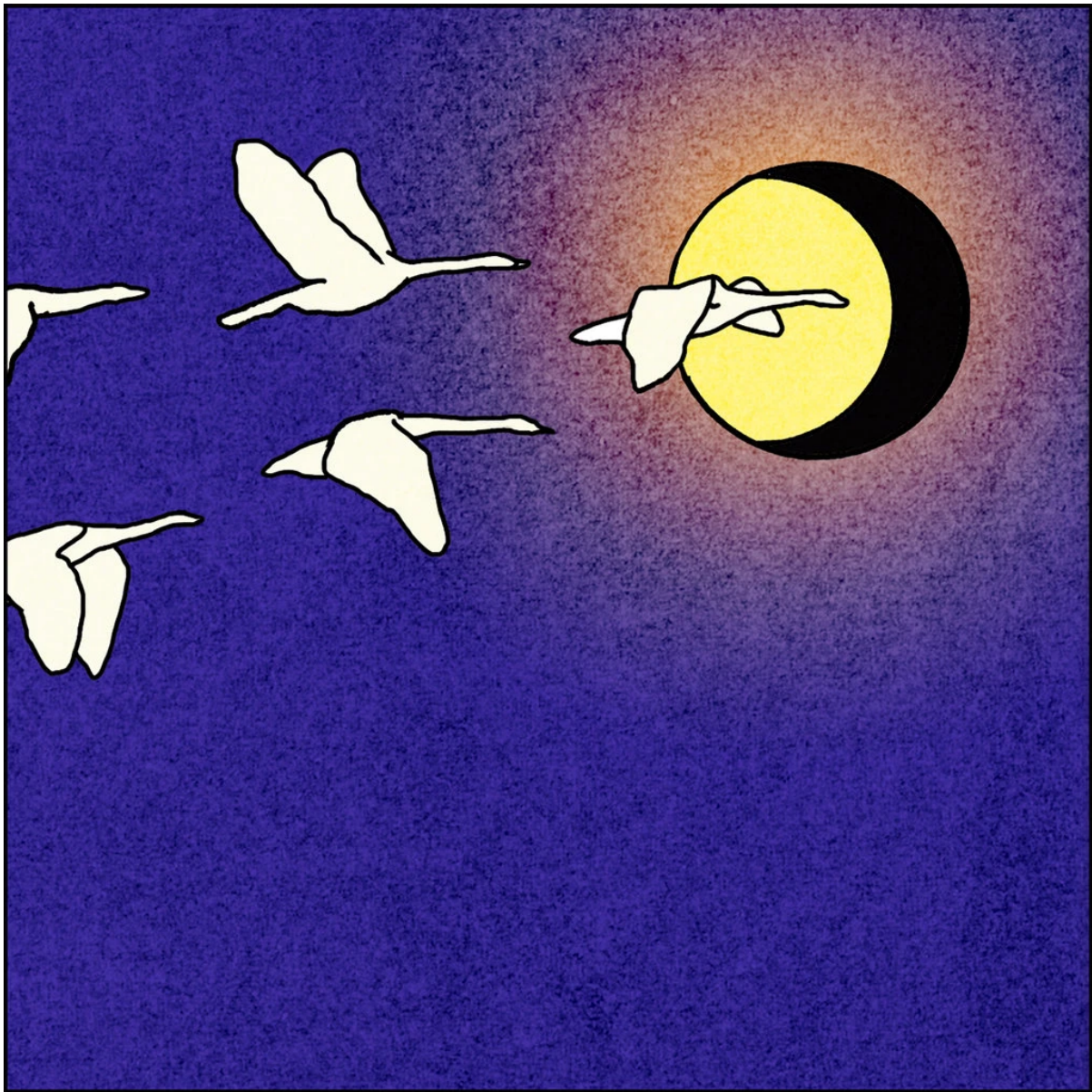
Finally, develop a set of concrete, alternative options that will engage you when you can feel yourself standing on the edge of a regret spiral about to fall in. The goal here is stop this type of thinking in its tracks before it consumes your energy. (Ideally, these choices don't involve venting or scrolling through Instagram, both of which can keep regret churning.)

One activity I have my patients try is to list their favorite authors in alphabetical order. When your mind is focused on a project, it's less likely to get derailed. Another idea: If you feel the grip of strong emotions, dip your face in ice water. (Really.)

"People become believers in this strategy once they get past the idea of plunging forward into a bowl of ice-water," said Dr. Kathryn Korslund, an expert in Dialectical Behavior Therapy, a treatment that teaches people how to manage emotions. She said that dipping your face in ice water works because it increases activity in the parasympathetic nervous system, lowering your body temperature and heart rate, preventing emotions from intensifying.

If that seems too jarring, pop an ice cube in your mouth and focus on the sensations. You'll find that it's difficult to simultaneously replay your life's mistakes while fully participating in doing something else.

Keep in mind: These activities aren't meant to be a permanent solution. The goal is to regulate your emotions for a few minutes to then approach your situation with a little more clarity.



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Step 3: Revisit your regret, then repeat these phrases

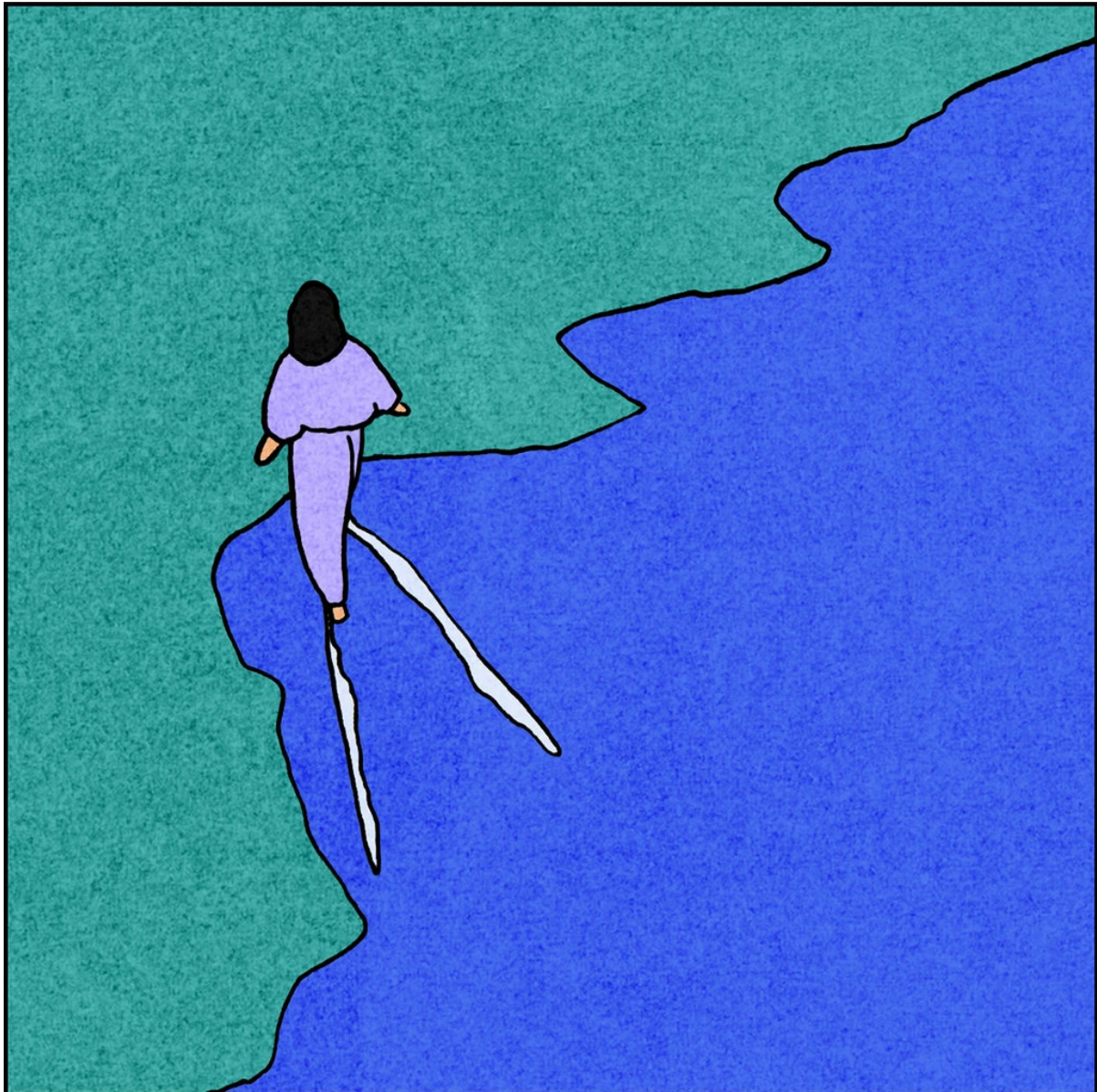
Remember that *silver lining* effect? This is how it works.

In the same study that found regret hinders our ability to solve problems, participants were asked to read the following two statements and recall at least one benefit from a regrettable event:

- *Everything can be viewed from a different perspective.*
- *There is positive value in every experience.*

Afterward, participants showed “improved subsequent performance” on the same set of tasks they completed before finding the silver lining.

In other words, focusing on what you gained can help you pivot from the negative impacts of regret. And keep in mind that so much of your regret story is just that: a story. Researchers even label regretful “if only” stories as counterfactual thinking, since it’s impossible to know how things would have turned out had you made a different choice.



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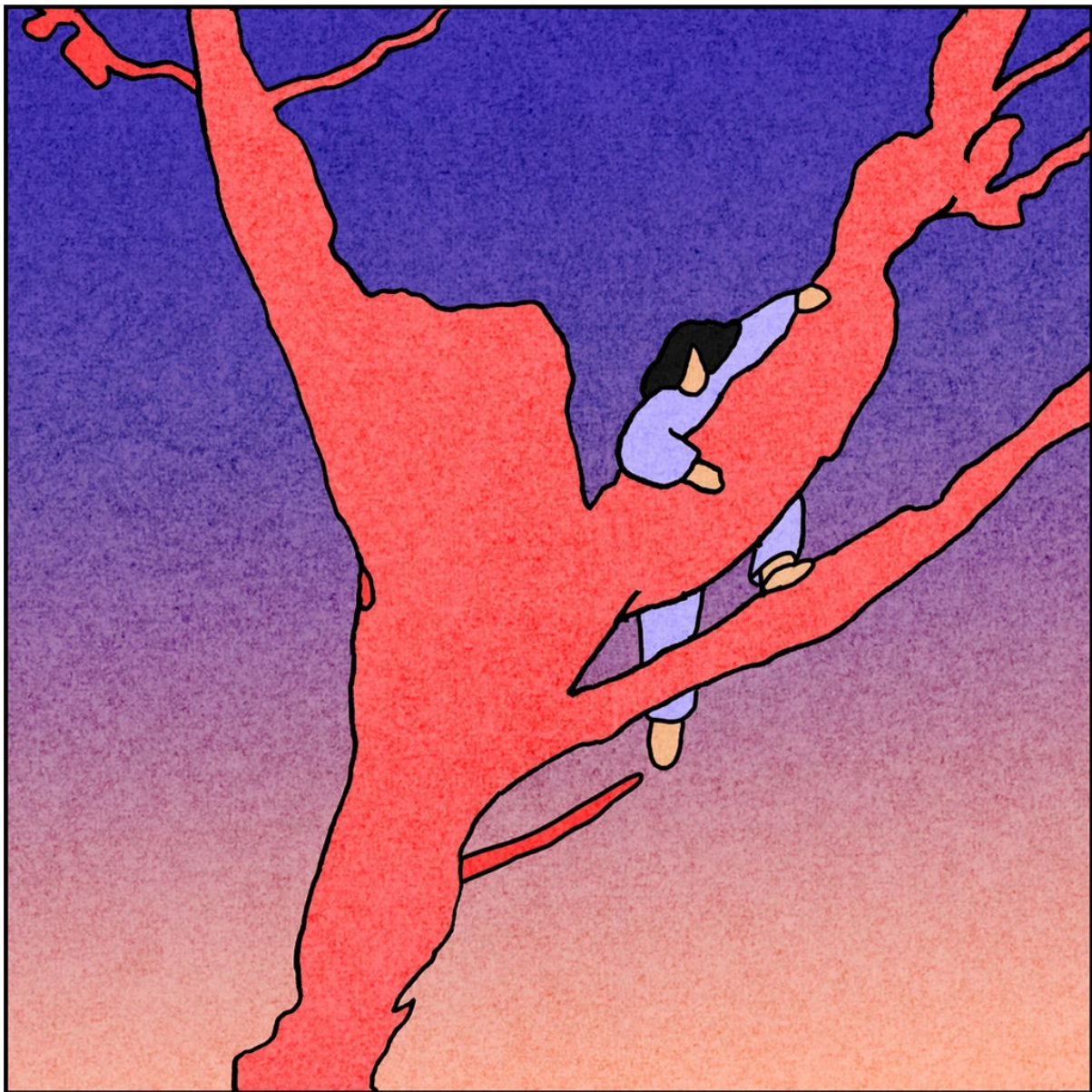
Step 4: Treat yourself like your ideal mentor would

Researchers at University of California, Berkeley, asked 400 students to write about their biggest regrets and found that self-compassion, not beating ourselves up, “spurs positive adjustment in the face of regrets.”

This “self-compassion led to greater personal improvement, in part, through heightened acceptance,” the researchers wrote, adding that “forgiveness stems from situating one’s shortcomings or failures — such as a regret experience — as a part of the common human experience.”

Imagine your mentor talking you down from a spell of regret. Would she focus on everything you did wrong? Or would she encourage you not to be so mean to yourself, and rather try to find the tangible, practical lessons you can learn from the experience?

When all else fails: Just talk to yourself like you’d talk to a friend.



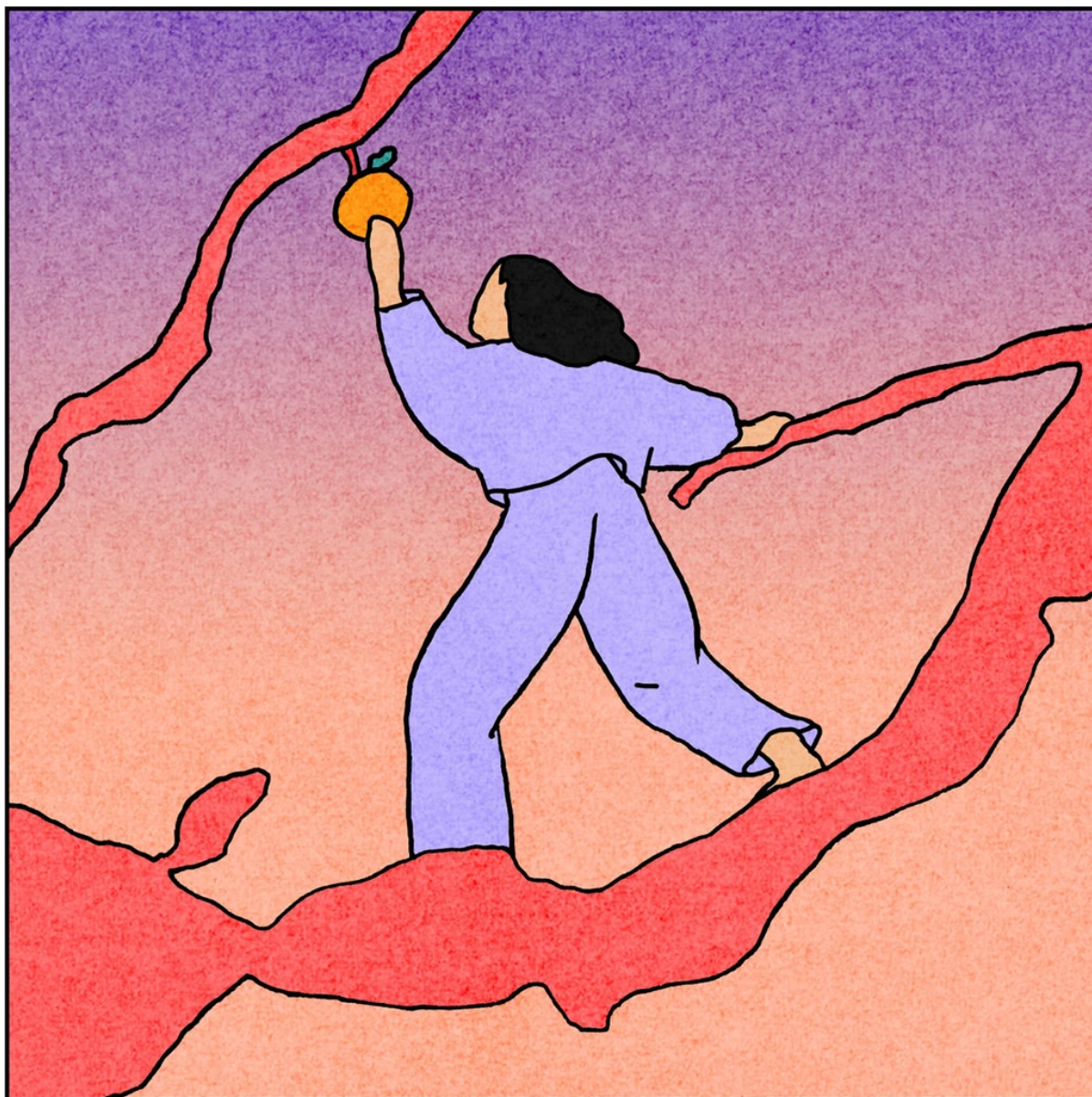
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Step 5: Clarify what matters to you

When you feel profound regret — the type that makes you wonder about your place in life, as opposed to regretting the dumb thing you said to your boss in the elevator — use the emotion as a springboard to examine what truly *is* important to you. Consider the values you most want to stand for, and the values that are core to your identity.

One of my clients came to see me after feeling guilty about how angrily she speaks to people. Together, we worked on utilizing her remorse to pinpoint the virtues she most cherishes — “I care about being nice rather than being right” was one — since focusing on the damage already done wouldn’t do her or her relationships any good.

Take the time to ask yourself *why* you feel such profound regret, and work backward to identify the values that are tied up in your feelings. Unraveling that knot can help you use that as motivation for personal growth.



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Step 6: Take action

There's a Japanese art called *kintsugi*. Literally translated, this means "golden repair." But it's much more than that.

Kintsugi is a philosophy of repairing broken things, like cracks in pottery, for example. Rather than hide an item's imperfections, the reparation process highlights them. Those imperfections are considered part of an item's history, and repairing it this way can add beauty to the original items — like using precious metal to fix cracks in pottery.

Make a list of regrets large and small, then brainstorm exactly how to take steps to remedy whatever is haunting you. The ultimate cure for anticipating regret isn't feeling lousy or overthinking. It's thoughtfully pursuing solutions, and using the wisdom gained through self-reflection to act.

Jennifer Taitz is a clinical instructor in psychiatry at University of California, Los Angeles, and the author of "How to be Single and Happy: Science-Based Strategies for Keeping Your Sanity While Looking for a Soul Mate" and "End Emotional Eating."

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