

On Regret: A Relational Gestalt Therapy Perspective

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Origins of this Chapter

This chapter had its origins in a dream. We were lying in bed, and Daisy woke up with a dream about Patrice, a surgeon and old college friend of Daisy's who had drifted out of her life following a painful rupture in their relationship. Daisy had referred a friend, Charles, to Patrice for consultation on a medical condition. The resulting surgery that Patrice performed on Charles did not have a good outcome, and Charles ended up suing Patrice. Patrice was deeply shamed by the whole incident, and although Daisy had reached out on numerous occasions to Patrice in order to begin a process of repairing the rupture that had occurred between them, a once very close, intimate relationship had now become cold and distantly cordial.

In the dream, Patrice was homeless. She came up to Daisy asking for a handout. When Patrice recognized Daisy, she flew into a rage, telling Daisy that because of her, the medical board had taken away her license and had thrown her out onto the street.

As Daisy shared the dream, tears flowed. She felt terrible about the part she had played in these events. What could she do now? She felt helpless, wishing she could get in a time machine and take back the fateful referral she had made of Charles to Patrice. It was impossible to undo the damage that had been done. Patrice's apparent shame and her distancing from Daisy was now well beyond Daisy's control.

We sat with the feelings of deep *regret* evoked by Daisy's dream and we began to muse on the feeling of *regret* itself. As experienced psychotherapists, Daisy and I have ways of understanding, framing, and working with other commonly experienced feelings such as shame, envy, grief, or anger. We have ways of understanding these experiences both for ourselves and for our clients. We had no corresponding way of understanding how to work with *regret* that would be a support to Daisy in sitting with these weighty feelings. And so, we resolved that for our own sakes and potentially to add

some thinking around this to the Gestalt literature, we would embark on writing this chapter in the pursuit of a deeper conception of how to think about, feel, understand and hold feelings of *regret* in our own lives and in the lives of our clients.

Introduction

In our work with clients, particularly those who are in later life, issues of regret are frequently weighty, painful, and difficult to integrate. Many of our clients struggle to cope with the reverberations of choices made or not made, with the impact over time of aware and unaware ways of relating, with the effect that their blind spots have had on them and those around them, or with a myriad of other ways in which regret may have formed in their lives. Regret is a phenomenon that typically develops gradually. It forms just outside the awareness of our consciously lived lives. It is the accumulation of that which has not come to fruition, that which has been frustrated, forgotten, or neglected. Regret can be a heavy burden for our later life clients and for ourselves as clinicians.

In this chapter, we will explore how the relational Gestalt perspective can help in our work with our clients who are experiencing regret. Conversely, we will explore how psychotherapeutic work around issues of regret can help illuminate many of Gestalt therapy's relational concepts.

We see varying levels of suffering among our clients who struggle with regret. For many, regret is a secret weight that they carry, invisible to the outside world. For others, regret shows up in depressed mood and increased anxiety. For some, regrets do not impair their functioning. For others, regret is part of a cluster of difficulties such as low self-esteem and avoidance that can impair the individual's capacity for coping and adapting to life's challenges. Regret and shame often reinforce one another – causing increased isolation and depression. When regret is complicated with shame, it is not uncommon to observe a pervasive sense of self that is colored by feeling unacceptable or less worthy than other people.

In the case example below, we discuss Janet, a woman for whom regret did not overtly impair her high functioning life. Her regret was held deeply inside, causing a pervasive sense of disappointment and failure in her life and causing her to feel “less than” others. In opening up to dialogue and connection around her regret in the therapy, she experienced a significant measure of healing in her sense of disappointment and failure.

Janet is a very talented and brilliant 55 year old psychologist who has been married for 17 years. Janet spent her 20s and early 30s working short term jobs, attending college on and off, dipping into a variety of progressive spiritual and political communities and being involved in a number of short-term relationships. With many unresolved issues from

her family of origin – she did not feel ready for a committed relationship until she was in her late 30s. She met her future life-partner, David, when she was 38. Janet was now settling into her chosen profession of clinical psychology and had become much more clear about what she wanted in life. David was eight years older than she, had a young son, Mark, and had recently emerged from a bruising divorce, in which child custody was hotly contested. Janet became aware over time of a deep desire to have a child. David however was quite negative about having another child. He was already overwhelmed with his current parenting responsibilities which included helping his son Mark deal with the divorce and helping Mark deal with his unstable and angry mother.

Janet lacked the confidence to advocate for having a child with David. She got deeply involved in helping David support Mark in the emotional chaos following David's divorce, and let her support for David and Mark supersede her own needs. She later came to understand that her fear of abandonment by David had outweighed her capacity to stand up for herself. Janet gave in to David's reluctance to have another child without a vigorous and sustained dialogue with him about her desire for a biological child that she and David could potentially have together. Janet did not fully appreciate the magnitude of this life-choice at the time, but over the years, her sense of grief, regret, loss and anger grew until it became the impetus to begin therapy with me (Peter).

In the therapy it soon became clear that although Janet had achieved much professional success, she was anguished by regret around not having had a child. She felt ashamed that her friends had children and that she did not. She felt *less-than* others, and felt like a fraud when working as a psychologist with her clients' parenting issues. She felt that no-one would take her seriously because of her childless status. She secretly felt that her life was a failure, because to her, motherhood was the most important thing.

In the early stages of therapy, Janet vacillated between anger at David and feeling disappointment in herself around not having insisted that she and David have a child together. She described her lack of a child as a dark, empty place in her soul. Much of the therapy with Janet consisted of "holding a container" for her by engaging in dialogue around grief and regret. I made no attempt to reframe her experiences or try to make "lemonade out of lemons." We learned together to tolerate the emptiness and loss that she felt. I shared with her that I too have experienced deep regret and loss in my life – and while I did not share the specifics of those experiences, I communicated to her that I could resonate with the pain and depth of her regret.

Although the weight of her regret (and what it evoked in me) felt like more than we could bear at times, I tried to support Janet in bringing her regret into cognitive, emotional and somatic awareness. The purpose of this was not to wallow in her regret, but to *be* with these feelings in the context of our relationship, so that we could hold the painful feelings together and with relational support.

It is not the case that Janet thought consciously about her regret constantly. Her regret was working in the background of her experience: shaping it and influencing her conscious experiences in ways that were out of her awareness. A sense of emptiness, resentment and failure in the background of her experience had become part of the *structured ground* that shaped her foreground experiences. The filter of her structured ground shaped her experiences in ways both subtle and overt. In her relationships with women who were mothers, she would frequently distance herself because of painful feelings of envy. In her relationship with her siblings, she felt “less than” because they all had children. In her relationship to her elderly parents, Janet felt less important than her siblings because she had not continued the bloodline. In her clinical psychology career, Janet often struggled with countertransference feelings of inadequacy when dealing with her patient’s parental concerns.

Over time, Janet came to accept her grief and regret as part of the texture of her life. She gradually developed the capacity to symbolize her regret, and began to view the desire for a child in the broader context of needing a greater sense of generativity in her life. She began to feel that she could manifest generativity in part by nurturing relationships that gave her a sense of continuity and meaning. When held relationally, (that is to say that when Janet and I held her feelings of loss, grief and regret between the two of us in the therapy), those feelings seemed to become more manageable and to take up less of a central position in her emotional life. Janet developed a more resilient sense of self-acceptance and balance that became the structured ground from which the foreground experience of regret came into relief, thus transforming the experience of regret from one of shame-based self-deprecation to one of experiencing her pain and disappointment as just one part of the fullness of her humanity.

Regret as Part of the Structured Ground of Our Lives

For some of our older clients, the lived life is haunted by what might have been. The phenomenon of regret is inextricably linked with the human experience of our forward and one-way movement through time and the choices we have made as we have moved through our lives. Each choice we make along the way precludes all other choices we might have made. And so, especially for some of our older clients, the life lived is shadowed by the

life that might have been had they chosen differently in areas such as career, education, love, or the ways they have treated others.

Frequently, in our middle-aged and older clients, regrets become part of the structured ground of experience. As Gordon Wheeler explains in *Gestalt Reconsidered*, “the personal subjective past is part of the structured ground, which conditions the dynamic creation of the present figure” (p.76) (Wheeler, 1991). Similarly, Jean Marie Robine states “it is not so much the figure itself that holds our attention as the relationship that the figure has with the ground that constitutes it and supports it” (location 999 Kindle edition) (Robine, 2015; Wheeler, 1991). In developing an awareness of the structured ground, subtle changes begin to occur in our clients’ foreground experiences. When regret plays a large part in organizing the structured ground of our clients’ experiences, it can be healing and transformative for our clients to experience their regrets as a shared experience, held together with the therapist in acceptance and compassion.

Creative Adjustments, Structured Ground, and Unaware Enactments

As Perls Hefferline and Goodman state “psychology is the study of creative adjustments” (p. 230) (Perls et al., 1994). “Correspondingly” the authors continue “abnormal psychology is the interruption, inhibition, or other accidents in the course of creative adjustment” (p. 231) (Perls et al., 1994). The creative adjustments we make in childhood become part of our structured ground in adulthood and deeply influence our perceptions and behavior. In the case study below, we look at Steve, a man whose regret centered around sexual activity that up-ended his marriage.

Steve is a client who grew up in a rigidly religious Mormon home. His father was a high-profile college president and his mother was far more attuned to the social requirements of her husband’s career than she was to parenting her five children. A live-in Nanny sexually abused Steve for many years. No-one in the family knew about, or attended to Steve’s distress. Steve was under great pressure to be the ideal Mormon son – a role he outwardly performed to perfection in terms of his academics, athletics and religious obligations. His creative adjustment was to be a high performer on the outside, while secretly he was suffering the effects of long-term sexual abuse. In adulthood, these creative adjustments shaped Steve’s structured ground – in which he experienced life as split between meeting the demands of a high achieving, successful, Mormon man, while splitting off his sexual life and needs.

It will perhaps come as little surprise that in adulthood Steve enacted the split between his achieving self and sexual self. He married a “nice

LDS girl" with whom he had four children and developed a high-powered sales career. Meanwhile he engaged in a wide range of clandestine sexual activity. When his wife found out about his secret sexual life, the walls came crashing down on him. After much struggle to save the marriage, they divorced. Steve's children, having been raised with the same morally rigid code of behavior as he was raised in, condemned Steve for his "betrayal of the family."

It was during this period that Steve came into therapy with me (Peter). He was racked with regret and remorse over his sexual behavior and the rupture in his relationship with his wife and children. Over time Steve learned to connect the splitting off of his *sexual self* from his *high performing self* with the creative adjustments he had made in childhood. In connecting the dots between his creative adjustments of childhood and his adult enactments, his self-condemnation began to soften. The regret that had evoked intense shame and self-loathing, gradually evolved into a symbol of the pain and trauma that had occurred in childhood due to his experience of neglect and long-term sexual abuse, coupled with his family's demands for high performance perfectionism. Both he and I were able to hold these feelings with compassion and understanding. In working his way through the shame and regret, Steve was able to begin to repair his relationship with his children. Over time, they too softened in their hurt, anger and condemnation of Steve. His relationships with all of his children were now on a much different, more human, more complex and more honest footing.

In working with regret, we clinicians often encounter enactments like Steve's. Some are less dramatic than his, while others are more extreme. The creative adjustments of childhood will almost inevitably shape in one way or another the choices we make in early adulthood. Sometimes those choices work for the long term. Sometimes they do not. When they do not, regrets may begin to form. Not uncommonly, the accumulation of regret over these life choices brings the client into therapy. The so-called mid-life crisis that many people experience is often connected with this form of regret. The young adult response to the original childhood situation may have appeared to have solved the original problems, but since the choices were often reactive to the childhood situation, and not part of working through or healing of the childhood issues, the choices made will sometimes boomerang and lock the client into a new set of problems (which in many cases end up repeating the underlying dynamics implicit in the original situation). In some cases, the client's regret will signal the need to make significant changes in their life circumstances. In other cases, the client's regret will symbolize a movement toward acceptance and compassion for all parties concerned and no overt changes in the client's circumstances will be called for.

Regret as Signal – Regret as Symbol

In my (Peter's) 1998 article, *Affective Process in Psychotherapy* (Cole, 1998), I discussed two distinct ways we can process our emotional responses. The first is to process the emotional response as a *signal* that something needs to change in our world. The second is to process the emotional response as a *symbol* of broader issues in our lives that call to us for further integration. For example, if a person feels regret about how they have hurt another in the past, that can be understood as a *signal* that they need to change their behavior in the future, or that they need to make amends with the person they have hurt. Another example would be the regret a person might feel for not having attained advanced formal education. Integrating this regret may be taken as a signal that they need to go out and pursue a higher academic degree. Regret as *signal* is a call to *action* – remorse or sadness about past choices stimulates the individual to make more fulfilling choices going forward.

On the other hand, when working with regret as *symbol* we are not looking to improve the situation in any significantly actionable way. Instead, the movement is toward acceptance, self-compassion and a sense of universality in that many people have regrets that cannot be "fixed." For example, suppose a client feels regret for having been hurtful to another person who has subsequently died. In any practicable way, it would be impossible for that client to make amends to the injured other. When processing this as a *symbol*, the regret of having hurt another can be utilized as a doorway into growth and integration. It might be that the injury inflicted on the other was in part, an enactment of the pain the client had experienced in their own childhood. For the client, accepting that she has enacted her own pain by inflicting it on others may be an important step in the development of self-compassion and integration. There is wisdom in understanding that not everything can be fixed or repaired in this life. There is poignancy and wisdom in recognizing that to be human is to sometimes injure and sometimes be injured. This is a part of our human condition that we must learn to live with.

When processing as a *symbol*, the regret of not having attained advanced formal education, a person might work toward *acceptance* of this circumstance. Further, the person might recognize, with self-compassion, that in earlier phases of their life, they had not received the interpersonal support or coalesced the self-support necessary for the successful pursuit of advanced education. Further work may involve moving toward acceptance of the qualities of achievement and satisfaction they have attained in their life and a general coming to terms with both the limitations and opportunities they have been able to avail themselves of.

Below, we explore the feeling of regret in the context of Gestalt therapy's Cycle of Experience (Zinker, 1977, 1980). We present two abbreviated cases.

In the first instance, we will examine how regret can be understood within the Cycle of Experience as a *signal* that calls forth practical, concrete actions that the person can take to make changes in their life. In the second instance, we will explore how regret can be understood as a *symbol* leading to wisdom, acceptance, and a poignant sense of life's mixed bag of satisfactions and disappointments; successes and failures; connections and disconnections.

Regret as Signal in the Cycle of Experience: Moving Toward Action and Change

Mary is 36 years old with a PhD in English Literature who is employed in a low-paid, high-stress Adjunct Professor role.

- 1 **Sensation** – Mary feels the weight of regret somatically – it is like a weight on her chest. She is aware of feeling a chronic sense of depression and heaviness in her body.
- 2 **Awareness** – When held in awareness, Mary finds that the somatic feeling of weight in her chest is connected with the feeling of regret. Mary regrets that she has spent too much of her life mirroring her father who has a very romanticized idea of an academic life for her. She is aware that she feels under-appreciated and underpaid in her academic career. As she stays with the flow of feelings, Mary becomes increasingly aware that she feels dissatisfied and unhappy with her academic career. She begins to be aware of a budding passion for psychology and psychotherapy, and starts to imagine what it might be like to become a psychotherapist.
- 3 **Mobilization of Energy** – Mary begins to awaken to aliveness around embarking on a new direction on her career path. After having successfully completed the arduous journey of earning her PhD in literature, Mary had never considered returning to school for another degree. Now however, she feels new energy in entertaining the thought of changing careers and pursuing a professional psychology degree. The thought of making such a big change had previously felt utterly overwhelming and impossible, but now she feels new energy for it. At the same time, on another level, she experiences exhilaration about emerging from her life-long confluence with her father's expectations, and finding her own, authentic direction in life.
- 4 **Action** – Mary pursues a Master's program in psychology, taking a courageous turn toward a new career path. She does the hard work of organizing her time, energy, and finances around this choice. Juggling her marriage, newborn child, work, internship, and school is intense, but she has the energy and determination to make it all work.
- 5 **Contact** – She makes exciting new connections with peers and mentors on her new career path. She makes better contact with her father, having

achieved a new separateness from him. She finds her internships and the work of psychotherapy to be a good fit.

- 6 **Satisfaction/New Equilibrium** – Having mobilized the energy to make a huge change in her life and having embarked on a new direction in her career, Mary feels a sense of satisfaction with her choices and finds a new balance in her life. She now has momentum in her new career and looks to her future with a rich, fulfilling sense of being on the right path in her life.

Regret as Symbol in the Cycle of Experience – Moving Toward Acceptance

Aaron is a 70-year-old retired attorney

- 1 **Sensation** – Aaron has a mild, vague headache and a sense of wanting to tear up and cry. He is aware of occasional bouts of despair that can feel intense emotionally and somatically.
- 2 **Awareness** – As he stays with the somatic sensations, he connects them with a feeling of regret. The regret is in relation to his law career. He is aware that his first choice would not have been to become a lawyer. Aaron's father and grandfather were both attorneys, but his passion had always been for music. Aaron also got in touch with anger around the physical abuse he suffered at the hands of his father. Furthermore, Aaron is aware that he spent most of his adult life living as a straight married man, when in truth, he is and always was gay. It was not until his mid-fifties that Aaron came out. He feels great regret for lost time in his work and life.
- 3 **Mobilization of Energy** – As Aaron stays with the regret, he is aware of holding a mixed bag of feelings. His legal career has provided a comfortable retirement, and for that, he is pleased. He now can focus on his music – which is also pleasing. At the same time, he grieves the many years he spent in legal work that he found “soul-sucking” as well as the loss of the many years he might have spent developing himself as a musician. He also grieves the many years he spent living in the closet and the loss of authenticity and love that he might have experienced all those years.
- 4 **Action** – In the therapy, Aaron is able to actively grieve his many years of less than fully authentic living. He is now able to cry, express anger at his (deceased) parents in the empty chair, and mourn the fact that it has taken many years for him to separate out his needs, desires, and aspirations from those he had introjected from his parents.
- 5 **Contact** – Together in therapy, we hold Aaron's regrets. He is able to cry about the many years he spent “in the wilderness.” We lament together that he will never develop the level of skill he might have on his cello had he devoted his life to music. We grieve together for his many years of

- desperation, loneliness, and low-grade suicidality as a closeted gay man living in a straight marriage. Together, we hold his many regrets, not trying to minimize or fix them.
- 6 **Satisfaction/New Equilibrium** – Before doing the work of grieving for his lost time, Aaron had been living in despair. Now he moves toward a sense of poignancy and acceptance, which gradually takes root as a new baseline affective state. As he works through the forces that shaped him, he comes to see his father as both an angry man who physically abused Aaron, and also as a wounded man who was himself in a great deal of psychic pain. Aaron worked toward developing compassion for his own younger self. He came to forgive the young man who made the choices he made – considering with self-compassion that his younger self had many fewer resources, less support, and far less knowledge of himself and of life than he now possesses in his later years.

Of course, in real life and real psychotherapy, modes of processing the experience of *regret* do not fit so neatly into categories of *Signal* or *Symbol*. There is usually a mix of the two, but in our experience, the work typically leans in one direction or the other. In the above examples, Mary worked with her regret symbolically as well as working with it as a signal to change her life. Examples of symbolizing include her finding universality in the experience of needing to separate and individuate from her father's expectations. She also experienced the *archetypal* nature of change by relating her long and difficult journey away from the expectations of her family of origin to those of mythical heroes and heroines of old such as Odysseus who left home in order to embark on his life's journey. She developed self-compassion in her acceptance that the choices she had made were the best she could do at that time in her development. Finally, she allowed us to hold the regret together, in the contact and container of the therapy relationship, thereby moving the regret out of the solitude of shame and into the intersubjective and compassionate space of the therapy relationship. With all of that said, the work leaned into the realm of action, signaled by her regret, whereby she took definite steps to change her life and career.

In the case of Aaron, where the emphasis was on the *symbolic* nature of working with his regret, there was much in the way of action that he did implement in his life, signaled by his grief and regret about the past. Aaron retired from his work in corporate law and spent a great deal of time listening to and writing about music. Although he had developed mild arthritis and was not able to actively return to the cello, he placed his love of music at the center of his life and joined a community chorus which he greatly enjoys. He also found a loving male partner and takes great joy in living as an open and proud gay man. While all of these changes were highly significant, they

did not erase the grief and deep regret Aaron felt for his many years of living out of alignment with his true self. So, while our therapeutic emphasis was on working with the regret as *symbol* and coming to terms with the many lost years, the work of change in the present, signaled by the regret, was woven into the work.

From Barrenness to Enrichment in the Structured Ground

It is the movement from a structured ground marked by shame and isolation to the enriched ground of connection and dialogue that forms the relational essence of healing the experience of oppressive regret. The relational work between therapist and client enriches the ground from which the client's foreground experience of regret becomes figural. Thus, there is an opportunity for regret to be transformed. The regret is no longer experienced as an oversimplified representation of the client's badness or failure, but as an experience far more complex: symbolizing many things such as the client's humanness, grief, disappointment, life's limitations and its poignancy.

When working with regret as *symbol*, awareness of the regret does not lead so much to action as it does to acceptance and integration. As such, our symbolic work with regret places emphasis on the relational dimensions of Gestalt therapy. Here, therapist and client are involved in holding the pain of regret *together*, thereby opening the *regret* up to a felt sense of greater spaciousness, compassion, and shared experience. Working with an emphasis on holding the regret relationally, between therapist and client, can be particularly helpful when the client has been carrying their regret in secrecy and shame. The depression or despair that frequently accompanies such regret can begin to soften and lighten when held in the shared humanity of the therapy relationship.

The relational emphasis is on *connection* as opposed to fixing. Where there was once a shame-based and underdeveloped structured ground in which the foreground experience of regret became figural: now, with the support of the therapist, and in relational connection to the therapist, the foreground experience of regret begins to shift as the structured ground becomes supported and enriched. *Shame* told the client that they were alone in the experiences they so deeply regret. *Shame* told them that they were *bad* for having had such experiences. A relational connection to the therapist helps to change the isolation and self-deprecation that colors the background the regret is held in. Now there begins to be room for a sense of *connection* – that the client is accompanied by another – the therapist – in the experience of regret. Let us bear in mind here that the therapist's role is primarily to *resonate* with the client – not to interpret, reassure or minimize the pain of the regret. Instead, the therapist (who hopefully has engaged in personal psychological work on

their own regrets), is able to connect with the client in a sense of shared humanity around the experience of regret and its inevitability in our lives.

Furthermore, a sense of the archetypal begins to emerge in the therapeutic joining around regret. Here, we borrow from the timeless work of Carl Jung (1980), whose understanding that the pathways of human experience have been charted in works of mythology and literature that have emerged from the human imagination since the dawning of human consciousness up to the present day.

A client recounts a story, held in deep regret, about a terrible rupture that occurred within his family: a rupture that he played a significant role in and was partly responsible for. We talk about the rupture within his family and his terrible regret about it for much of the therapeutic hour. I share with him that I too have experienced ruptures in my family that I deeply regret. Additionally, I ask if I can tell him a story, which he agrees to hear. It is from The Baghavad Gita. There is a war between two factions of a great family. Arjuna is a warrior in a chariot and is a member of the family at war with itself. He does not want to participate in the battle. He has no desire to be part of this rupture between two factions of his family. His chariot driver, Krishna, who is an incarnation of the divine, understands Arjuna's repulsion for the battle, yet instructs Arjuna to be "in it, but not of it". By this, Krishna means that Arjuna must fulfill his karmic role in this battle between family factions, but he can approach the situation without attachment to hate, and with an understanding that compassion and forgiveness are qualities he can bring to the battlefield.

This begins to introduce the *Archetypal* to my client's experience of regret. It is not meant as a morality tale or as a spiritual lesson, but as an enrichment of the structured ground. Now – he has two facets of an enriched ground that support the foreground experience of his regret. First, there is my presence and connection with him. Secondly, there is a story from humanity's collective imagination that may help enrich his experience, and help him see his regret in the light of being a part of the human family.

A sense of self-compassion and self-acceptance are qualities that often flow naturally from the experience of relational connecting with the therapist around issues of regret. Having opened up to connection and broken down the walls of shame that held the regret locked inside, my client begins to feel that his experience, while painful, is part of the broader human experience and in some larger way may be part of what makes him human and subject to those experiences common to the human condition. Bringing in the *archetypal* piece adds an imaginal element to this sense of connectedness. Not only is my client connected with others in his experience of regret, but

he is also connected to the stories of collective imagination that capture the shared experiences of our human condition.

Relational Gestalt therapy provides a strong theoretical foundation for psychotherapy with people who suffer from debilitating or oppressive feelings of regret in their lives. Its foundations in dialogue, intersubjectivity, contact, presence, and the paradoxical theory of change all support an approach that seeks connection and integration of these feelings rather than an approach that interprets them, minimizes them, or seeks to replace or extinguish such feelings.

Countertransference Considerations

Regret takes a toll on the client. At the same time, it can be almost equally painful for the therapist as the therapist sits with the client grieving over regrets. It can be painful for the therapist to sit with the client's deeply held regrets, especially when the therapist's own regrets may be triggered. Regrets that act as *signal* can be enlivening and satisfying to work with for both client and therapist. There is still something that can be done. Action can be taken. Problems can be at least ameliorated if not resolved. When regret is seen as *symbol*, however, the path is much less clear and much more strewn about with thorns. At this point, regret comes too late: such as the man who didn't visit his mother as she lay on her death bed or the alcoholic, now sober, who grieves over lost family and much harm done.

In these situations, there is little in the way of practical help that the therapist can offer. Sometimes things really cannot be fixed or relationships repaired. As therapists, our work is to sit with the client, keeping an open heart, and being present to the client's intense feelings of grief and regret. It is vital that the therapist not distance themselves. It can be quite a temptation to "make things right" by trying to help the client look at the reasons that the events in question were not too disastrous or to highlight ways that the client did the best they could at the time.

An inevitable aspect of being human is the experience of failure. At various points in our lives, each of us has fallen short and caused harm to ourselves and others. In the face of the regret that the client holds in connection to their failures, the central task of the therapist is to resonate with the client's feelings. Often the therapeutic task is not to sympathize or fix, but to resonate – in the same way that a guitar resonates when a string is plucked. Ideally, the therapist can let the client's regret enter into the therapist's own being, which in turn may stimulate reverberations of the therapist's own regrets. It is therefore vital that we therapists continue to work on ourselves including our regrets. If we can tolerate, and even welcome such feelings in our own lives, then we are much better equipped to be relationally present and resonant with the client's regrets.

Conclusion

Working with regret often stirs up complex and painful feelings for therapist and client alike. Helping our clients move through the experience of regret requires both therapist self-awareness and an openness to resonate with the client's pain. The difficult truth is that there is no shortcut. Regret that is explored and grieved in the shared space of the therapeutic relationship creates a strong and steady ground from which the client may move forward in their life. Working with regret may catalyze important change in the client's life or it might lead to greater self-acceptance and an appreciation of the poignancy of our human condition from which none of us emerge unscathed. It is by facing and embracing the pain of our regrets that we become better able to integrate them into a rich and contactful life.

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