



Hemalatha Swaminathan

On the 4th of September, a session was conducted by the Eklavya Foundation for Mental Health. Mrs. Manjiri Deshmukh gave an overview of the foundation's objectives, its ongoing initiatives, and forthcoming programs. Following this introduction, Mr. Ganesh Rajan formally introduced the keynote speaker, Ms. Hemalatha Swaminathan. A licensed psychologist and counselor, she is an awardee and an active member in the fields of theatre and research.

She addressed the topic of regret, a complex and universally experienced emotion. Regret often evokes feelings of guilt and shame, emotions that can be challenging to manage. She

explained that society tends to promote two extreme responses to regret: either moving forward and leaving it behind or dwelling on it. The belief that life is linear and that missed opportunities are irrevocably lost is frequently enforced by societal norms. However, Ms. Swaminathan argued that this belief only applies to about 20% of life's opportunities, while in the majority of cases, individuals can find ways to mitigate or overcome their regrets. She pointed out that this misconception often leads to undue self-blame.

Ms. Swaminathan proceeded to outline common causes of regret, such as missed opportunities, fear of failure, inaction, poor decision-making, lack of courage, neglecting relationships, prioritizing the wrong things, ignoring intuition, comparing oneself to others, and unfulfilled potential. She noted that regret is a natural consequence of reflection on past choices, but she stressed that younger individuals in particular, often lack the knowledge, experience,

and resources to make fully informed decisions at the time. She further explained that ignoring one's intuition or gut feelings frequently contributes to feelings of regret in later life. To illustrate the possibility of overcoming regret, Ms. Swaminathan shared the story of Howard Schultz, the CEO of Starbucks, who successfully acknowledged his past mistakes and took steps to rectify them. This example highlighted the importance of taking responsibility and seeking solutions while dealing with regret.

Ms. Swaminathan also offered a detailed scientific explanation of the mechanisms behind regret, focusing on the brain regions involved. She explained that the prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for decision-making, becomes activated when individuals realize that an alternative decision could have led to a better outcome. This activation often leads to second-guessing and doubt, which in turn, makes the brain vulnerable

to negative emotions. Additionally, the amygdala, which functions as the brain's alarm system for negative emotions, intensifies the experience of regret by signaling distress whenever a person contemplates past mistakes. From a cognitive perspective, counterfactual thinking or imagining alternative scenarios further aggravates regret by creating a parallel reality in which better decisions could have been made. This thought process impairs the individual's ability to focus on the present and can lead to a cycle of self-doubt.

Ms. Swaminathan further discussed the impact of regret on mental health, citing examples from her work with clients. Many individuals carry unresolved feelings of regret, which often manifest in complex emotional responses such as guilt, shame, disappointment, anger, fear, helplessness, and anxiety. These intertwined emotions strengthen the hold of regret on the individual, making it

more difficult to process and overcome. She stressed that not all regrets can be changed or rectified, and accepting this fact is crucial for emotional well-being. Ms. Swaminathan highlighted the psychosomatic indicators of regret such as digestive issues, fatigue, breathing difficulty, weakened immunity, and skin problems.

To help attendees work through their feelings of regret, Ms. Swaminathan led an introspective exercise that encouraged them to reflect on past decisions, unresolved emotions, and the impact of those decisions on their current lives. Attendees were guided through a Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) exercise that aimed to reframe regret by focusing on what was within their control at the time of the event. This approach allowed participants to evaluate whether they did their best in the given situation while emphasizing that feelings of shame and guilt are often unproductive. The exercise encouraged attendees to

appreciate their efforts and extract valuable lessons from their experiences, providing them with a practical tool for managing future feelings of regret. Ms. Swaminathan also introduced several techniques for letting go of regret, such as journaling, expressing gratitude, practising Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy (REBT) to address guilt and shame, and engaging in mindfulness exercises to stay grounded in the present.

Ms. Swaminathan further offered practical suggestions for living fully in the present, emphasizing the importance of mindful decision-making and setting clear intentions. She highlighted the significance of taking responsibility for one's actions and pursuing personal passions, even when constrained by life circumstances. Building resilience was another key point, as she reminded the audience that tough times do not last, but resilient individuals can adapt and overcome challenges. She provided ten actionable ways to

enhance resilience, including taking on new challenges, seeking help and support, practising gratitude, intentionally caring for oneself, learning something new, finding purpose in daily activities, creating time for reflection, stepping outside one's comfort zone, focusing on solutions rather than excuses, and maintaining a hopeful outlook.

Additionally, attendees were asked to engage in an exercise that encouraged them to reflect on whether there were any opportunities they could still pursue, despite previously regretting their inaction. This activity aimed to inspire participants to take proactive steps in addressing their regrets, reinforcing the message that it is often possible to rectify past decisions or seize new opportunities in the present.

Mrs. Manjiri raised a pertinent question regarding the challenges faced when working with individuals with mental health issues. She inquired,

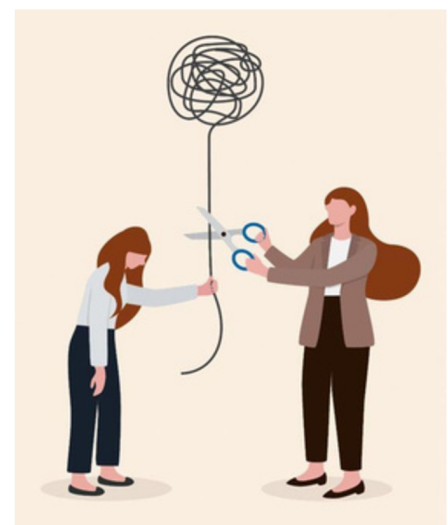
"Since we are working with people who have mental health issues, there are times when treatment is delayed or time is lost, leading to regret. Given that some situations cannot be reversed, how can we make peace with this?" In response, Ms. Hemalatha Swaminathan emphasized the importance of focusing on what can be changed. She suggested that by taking actionable steps to address situations where change is possible, individuals can gradually reduce feelings of resentment. This in turn, fosters acceptance of the things that cannot be changed, reducing feelings of regret and helplessness. She explained that once action is taken in areas where change is possible, self-doubt diminishes, and acceptance increases.

Another attendee asked how to process self-doubt after making decisions. Ms. Swaminathan recommended applying REBT, advising that when one aspect—whether cognitive or emotional, is weak, the other can be

strengthened to counterbalance it. In response to another question on how to create a safe space and maintain a hopeful outlook, she suggested the practice of journaling. Journaling provides a space for reflection and eventually becomes an enjoyable process. Through journaling, individuals can make small decisions that validate their emotions and work towards happiness.

When asked by another attendee how to stop overthinking, Ms. Swaminathan stressed the importance of identifying the root cause of overthinking, as it is not a natural state but rather a learned pattern of thinking. Overthinking elevates cortisol levels, leading to unnecessary stress and disorders. She recommended Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) as an effective technique for reducing overthinking as well as navigating through emotions. One should focus on the things that fall within their circle of control. Accept what you can and learn from what you can't.

Another question that came up was how to make peace with something harsh that you said out of anger and now regret. According to Ms. Swaminathan, if one has apologized and tried to fix their past mistake, then they have clearly learned. If the other person is a well-wisher, they will accept the apology and let it go, something which we all do often. Yet, there may be times when the other person is not ready to forgive. Understand that not everyone has the same time frames; a person can get over a situation in a short period while another could need years to let it go. If the regret and shame are weighing you down, turn to a mental health professional for help.



Lastly, Ms. Swaminathan recommended the following self-help books:

- Don't Believe Everything You Think by Joseph Nguyen
- How to Stop Worrying and Start Living by Dale Carnegie
- 27 Thoughts on Having No Regrets in Life by Sivart
- Make Time: How to Focus on What Matters Every Day by Jake Knapp and John Zeratsky

Ms. Hemalatha Swaminathan's webinar was a success, as proven by the instant and positive feedback from the attendees.

The presentation offered valuable tools for understanding, accepting, and learning from regret, making it a powerful resource for anyone wishing to move forward and start living life to the fullest.

**- Report by Sannika Tamhane and Vaishnavi Patil
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