

Commentary: Here are the Top End-of-Life Regrets

By Steven Hendlin, PhD

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Palliative nurse Bronnie Ware worked with patients who'd gone home from the hospital to die. She assisted them the last three to 12 weeks of their lives.

Ware found these people, when faced with their impending mortality, would reflect on their lives with a high degree of honesty and clarity. When she asked them about regrets or anything they would have done differently, Ware found that there were five most often-cited regrets they mentioned:

1. To be more true to myself, less concerned with the expectations of others. This was the most common regret as they reflected on how many of their dreams did not materialize because of their choices - either actively made or passively not made. They realized that while they were healthy, they did not choose to do even half of the things they would have liked in their lives and that by the time they lost their health, it was too late. How many would have felt more true to their own path had they received some help along the way as to how to do this?
2. Less time spent working. Ware claims this came from every male patient she nursed. Because of overwork, they missed their children growing up and their partner's companionship. The inverse of this comes in the form of the common axiom that you never hear a dying person say, "I wish I had worked more in my life." And yet, in a culture that breeds us to be highly competitive in every aspect of life and to over-indulge in conspicuous consumption, the odds are good that this will continue to be high on the list of end of life regrets.
3. The courage to express feelings. Keeping peace with others meant learning to suppress their own feelings. They never became all they had wanted because they did not know how to express themselves openly and honestly. This led to bitterness and resentment that for some, led to various kinds of illness. One of primary tasks of good psychotherapy is learning to clearly identify and express your feelings, and acquiring the courage to do it.
4. Staying in touch with friends. There were deep regrets about not staying in touch with friends over the years, and not giving friendships the time and effort they deserved. Ware said, "Everyone misses their friends when they are dying. It all comes down to love and relationship in the end."
5. The wish to let oneself be happier. Because they were stuck in old habits, and the fear of change was high, they stayed in miserable relationships and led limited lives. They did not view "the pursuit of happiness" as a choice that was in their power to make. Too constricted and too concerned with the judgments of others, they lost the ability to laugh easily and to play freely.

Ware wrote a book about her work, "The Top Five Regrets of the Dying - A Life Transformed by the Dearly Departing," Her website is [InspirationAndChai.com](#)

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