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Regret appraisals, age, and subjective well-being[☆]

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Abstract

This study examined whether regrets are associated with age and subjective well-being in a sample of 176 participants ranging in age 19 to 82 years. Participants were asked to name unattained goals or events which they currently regret, and appraise these along a number of dimensions such as changeableness and consequences. The results showed that those who appraised their regret-related goals or events as having an impact on their present lives, reported a lower level of life satisfaction and more physical symptoms than those who appraised their regrets as having less consequence. There were also age differences in the regret appraisals. The older adults evaluated their regret-related goals or events as being less likely to change than did the younger adults.

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1. Introduction

It has been suggested that people direct their own lives (Brandstädter, 1984) by setting personal goals and striving towards their attainment (Nurmi, 1993; Winell, 1987). It has also been proposed that goal attainment is an important criterion for successful life-span development (Marsiske, Lang, Baltes, & Baltes, 1995) and consequently for subjective well-being (see e.g., Little, 1989). However, not all goals are attained and some goal attainments may have unintended consequences. These aspects of goal-directed action have recently been conceptualized as life regrets (Lecici, Okun, & Karoly, 1994) or other related concepts (Heckhausen & Kuhl, 1985;

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Klinger, 1975, 1987; Martin & Tesser, 1989). The research in the field has typically focused on the relation between regrets or unattained goals, and well-being (Kuhl & Helle, 1986; Lecci et al., 1994; McIntosh, Harlow, & Martin, 1995). It might also be assumed, however, that the kinds of regrets, and the ways in which people appraise them, vary from one life stage to another. Similarly, the associations between regrets, their appraisals and well-being may change as people grow older. However, no research has been carried out on age differences in regret-related appraisals. In addition, research related to regret appraisals and subjective well-being in which people are asked to name their regrets in their own words is scarce. Consequently, this study focused on examining age differences in regret appraisals, and the ways in which regret appraisals are associated with individuals' subjective well-being.

Brandtstädter and Renner (1990, p. 59) suggested that one way "to achieve consistency between actual and intended courses of personal development" is to set developmental goals and strive for their attainment. In other words, a gap between actual and desired developmental states is an important motivator across the life course. Nurmi (1993) conceptualized this self-direction as a three-stage process. First, people set themselves personal goals to direct their own development. Next, they try to achieve their goals through various plans and actions, and third, they evaluate how successful they have been in realizing those goals. This evaluation will arouse either positive or negative emotions depending on to the extent to which their goal attainments match with desired states (Carver & Scheier, 1990). In the case of unattained goals this process and its consequences has been described in terms of an incentive disengagement cycle (Klinger, 1975, 1987) and rumination (Martin & Tesser, 1989): an unattained goal first generates frustration, then an increased effort to attain it, leading finally, if it continues to be unattained without disengagement, to increased depressive symptoms (Klinger, 1987).

In this theoretical framework the term regret refers to the fact that some goal attainment or its consequences have not been achieved as intended. A regret may reflect an unattained goal which is cited as one reason why one's actual life course has not converged with the intended one in some important respect. For example, if one is not satisfied with one's occupational career, one may have regrets related to one's past educational goals and investments, because education is a relevant resource in working life. In addition, a regret may reflect a striving or aspiration which has had unintended consequences for other life domains (Emmons & King, 1988). For example, one may have lavished one's limited time resources on work at the expense of family life. In general, regret may be defined as a "a more or less painful cognitive and emotional state of feeling sorry for misfortunes, limitations, losses, transgressions, shortcomings, or mistakes." (Landman, 1993, p. 36).

It has been suggested that the regulation of discrepancies between actual and intended personal development differs from one period of life to another (Brandtstädter & Renner, 1990). For instance, younger adults might be assumed to employ more proactive regulation than older age groups: they may actively strive for a congruence between actual and intended developmental states by acting in accordance with their intentions and goals. In such cases, a person deploys assimilative coping (Brandtstädter & Renner, 1990) or primary control (Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995).

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