

What is Regret?

Regret is a feeling, described as sorrow aroused by circumstances beyond one's control or power to repair (Merriam-Webster, 2023). Regret can arise from wishing one made a different decision regarding gender care and some people feel regret across the course of transition. Some people decide to detransition while others feel it best to remain in the gender they transitioned to.

Someone who detransitions may regret an initial transition because it did not bring the happiness or ease in their body they had anticipated. They may feel sorrow because of the unhappiness they experienced while transitioning or because they feel discomfort with their bodies due to the irreversible effects of hormones or surgeries. Not all regret implies someone thinks they should have made different decisions in the past; they may just wish things had played out differently. It is also important to note that not all people who detransition experience regret. Some people feel the experience of transition enabled personal discovery and to clarify their identity, and they feel content with the physical changes from transitioning.

A Cognitive Behavioral Approach

Because regret is a feeling, it relies on a number of different perspectives or perceptions. To feel regret, you need to first see a circumstance as beyond your control. There may be a number of other thoughts that support feelings of regret.

Common Thoughts:

“I should have known better.”

“There is no way to fix this.”

“Why couldn't I have decided differently?”

“My decision caused me so much harm.”

“I wish others hadn't made me make that decision.”

“I wish I hadn't listened to them when making my decision.”

“I wish someone stopped me.”

One way of managing feelings of regret is to identify these underlying thoughts and to subject them to more scrutiny. For instance, if you have the thought that you “should have known better,” you might ask yourself additional questions to challenge this thought, i.e. Why should I have known better? How could I have known better? Did I know that there was a better decision at the time? Do I know that another decision would have been genuinely better? Below are some suggestions about questions you can ask to challenge thoughts that support feelings of regret.

“I should have known better.”	Why should I have known better? How could I have known better? Did I know that there was a better decision at the time? Do I know that another decision would have been genuinely better?
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“There is no way to fix this.”	Are there other ways to resolve the situation? What decisions can I make in the present to make myself happier? What “problem” am I trying to fix? Is it genuinely a problem, and who is it a problem for? Is this a problem for other people or for me personally?
“Why couldn’t I have decided differently?”	What were my thoughts and feelings when I made the decision? Could those thoughts and feelings have been different? Were there other factors influencing my decision, and could they have been different? Did I know the consequences of my decision before making it?
“My decision caused me so much harm.”	How much harm has my decision caused me and what kind (i.e. physical, emotional, spiritual)? Are my feelings of regret in proportion to the harm that was caused? What can I do in the present to heal from harm?
“I wish I hadn’t listened to them when making my decision.”	How would I have known the difference between good advice and bad advice at the time I made my decision? Could I have known the difference? Were there good reasons to trust someone else’s expertise?
“I wish others hadn’t made me make that decision.”	If someone else caused me harm, how can they be held accountable? How can they help in healing from harm or in making things better? What is a reasonable pathway to forgiveness that can support my healing?

For instance, someone assigned female at birth may regret having had top surgery because top surgery did not improve feelings of bodily discomfort and actually made the feelings of bodily discomfort worse. The feeling of regret may be based in a desire for a deeper understanding of oneself in the past, when medical decisions were being made, to prevent the present pain. These thoughts can be subjected to scrutiny, offering alternate perspectives.

Thought	Challenge	Alternate
“My healthcare provider should have known better.”	How would my healthcare provider have known better? How can my healthcare provider be held accountable? What can my healthcare provider do to make amends?	My healthcare provider was not an expert in intersections between trauma, mental illness, and gender dysphoria, so they may not have known any better. My healthcare provider could make things better by at least apologizing. They could also learn more

		about how to help me with my past and current needs and to better support others to make better decisions.
“I should have known better.”	Why would I have known better? How could I have known better? Do I know that a different decision would have been better?	I am also not a mental health expert, so I could not have known about ways that gender dysphoria overlapped with other mental health symptoms. Even if I scoured the Internet, I may have found nothing without the correct search terms. In fact, I might have still pursued top surgery because I thought it would make me happier. It is possible that I might not even know about additional mental illness that makes me unhappy if I had not pursued gender transition, so I might even be more unhappy now if I hadn’t due to undiagnosed mental illness.
“Surgery caused me so much harm.”	How much harm has my decision caused me and what kind (i.e. physical, emotional, spiritual)? Are my feelings of regret in proportion to the harm that was caused? What can I do in the present to heal from harm?	Surgery has caused me physical and emotional harms. However, my body is otherwise in good physical health and I’m learning ways to heal from emotional harms. I might even feel dissatisfied with my body somewhat even if I had not pursued the surgery. Maybe today I can journal about my feelings and reflect on the parts of my body I feel content with.
“There is no way to fix this.”	Are there other ways to resolve the situation? What decisions can I make in the present to make myself happier? What “problem” am I trying to fix? Is it genuinely a problem, and who is it a problem for? Is this a	Maybe I can set up a consultation with a surgeon to see what options I might have to change my body so that I can feel more comfortable. Part of the reason I regret top surgery is because of the negative reactions I sometimes get from

	<p>problem for other people or for me personally?</p>	<p>prospective romantic partners. Anyway, and I don't need to consider a relationship with someone so shallow. There are others who have been supportive to me. Maybe today I can take some time to enjoy what my body can do, like go for a walk or enjoy a favorite meal?</p>
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An Embodiment Approach

Finding enjoyable activities can offer ways to reduce any negative feeling (including regret), and most people first known enjoyment or pleasure through their bodies, through the five senses (sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell). If you feel regret because of past or present unhappiness about your body, experiences of pleasure through the body can be a powerful reminder that your body is more than those parts that have changed and that your body can still help you to experience pleasure, especially through the senses of taste, smell, and touch. Below is a list of activities you can use to experience pleasure through your body:

Sunbathing

Swimming

Having a bath (clothing optional, as wearing clothing may ease discomfort with one's body while helping you to feel the relaxation of the warm water)

Running

Walking

General Exercise

Having a favorite meal

Trying a new food

Smelling the roses (or other pleasantly scented item)

Drinking water

Cloud watching

Stargazing

Using a weighted blanket

Listening to music

Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR)

Meditation (focused on breathing)

Having a manicure/pedicure

Having a massage

Giving yourself a massage

Being in Nature (i.e. going for a hike, going to the beach)

The above are only suggestions, though. If you notice worsening mood or other signs of declining mental health, please consult with a qualified mental health professional or call 911 in cases of psychiatric emergency.