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Many people die with regrets, but it doesn't have to be that way. In *The Top Five Regrets of the Dying*, palliative care nurse Bronnie Ware shares the five most common regrets her patients had in their final weeks of life. She argues that **living without regret requires courage and reflection** because society's expectations and limiting beliefs can lead you to prioritize the wrong things and make choices that don't actually make you happy. By learning from others' end-of-life reflections, you can clarify what truly matters, stop procrastinating on making positive changes, and start living a life you won't regret.

Ware is a songwriter, speaker, and a self-proclaimed "teacher of courage." She entered the field of palliative care—providing comfort care for people with serious and often terminal illnesses—after leaving her banking career. The work resonated with her, and she ended up working eight years in palliative care, where she learned many life lessons from her patients. She has authored several other books including *Bloom*, a memoir about her experiences with an autoimmune disease, and *Your Year for Change*, in which she shares 52 inspiring stories for living regret-free.

In this guide, we've divided the five regrets Ware explores into two types: regrets about yourself and regrets relating to others. We'll explain what these regrets are, why they're so common, and how to avoid them. Then, we'll explore Ware's tips for developing more courage to make choices you won't regret. Along the way, we'll share psychological insights about regret and provide additional tips from self-help experts for living a fulfilling life.

## Regrets About Yourself

The first type of regret Ware's patients commonly expressed was regrets they had about themselves—**things they wished they had done differently with respect to how they led their lives and treated themselves**. These regrets reveal lessons about living authentically and choosing happiness.

### The Regret of Not Living Authentically

Ware writes that **the number one regret her clients had was not living an authentic life**. Living authentically means acting and making choices based on what you truly want and on the values you believe in. Many of Ware's patients expressed that they had let the expectations of others dictate how they should live instead of honoring their own dreams and desires.

(Shortform note: In *101 Essays That Will Change the Way You Think*, Brianna Wiest explains why we might unknowingly live inauthentically: From an early age, we realize that we can get attention, love, and approval by pleasing others—for example, by getting good grades to make our parents proud or dressing a certain way to fit in with our peers.

As we grow older, this habit of seeking external validation becomes so ingrained that we lose touch with our true desires. As a result, we may inadvertently make life choices based on what we think others want from us, rather than what we truly want for ourselves.)

Ware shares an example from one of her patients named Grace, who had lived according to society's expectations instead of her own wishes: Despite wanting to travel the world and live free from her husband, she felt pressured to remain in an unhappy marriage. When her husband had to move into a nursing home and Grace finally gained freedom, she fell ill with a terminal illness. In her final moments, she regretted not having found the courage to live the way she wanted to sooner.

(Shortform note: Divorce rates among older couples are on the rise. This trend, known as "gray divorce," has seen a sharp increase since 1990, while divorce rates for younger people have declined. Experts point out many reasons for this increase: For example, divorce is more socially acceptable and less stigmatized than it used to be (a barrier that Grace had struggled with). Women also have more financial independence than in previous generations, which gives them more freedom to leave unhappy marriages.)

Find the Courage to Be Yourself

Ware writes that to live authentically, you must **find the courage to let go of others' expectations**. Fear of judgment and ridicule can push you to hide or suppress your desires and even your identity to conform to the norm or to please others. Ware experienced this struggle herself, staying in unfulfilling banking roles for a decade because she was afraid of facing disapproval from her family. However, Ware argues that when you let this fear control your choices, you'll almost inevitably have regrets at the end of your life.

Let go of others' expectations by recognizing that they don't matter in the end. Ware's patients found that in their final moments, the opinions of others were meaningless.

(Shortform note: In [*The Subtle Art of Not Giving a Fck*] (<https://shortform.com/app/book/the-subtle-art-of-not-giving-a-f-ck>)\*, Mark Manson says that if you want to stop letting other people's expectations define how you live, you must practice rejection. Decide on the people and experiences that matter most to you and say no to everything else—whether it's an activity that doesn't make you happy, a burdensome relationship, or an unnecessary possession. When you commit to a few key priorities, you feel less pressure to conform to what others want. You'll also experience more satisfaction because by committing to your values and the things you care about, you won't constantly wonder if you'd be happier with a different choice.)

## The Regret of Neglecting Happiness

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According to Ware, the second self-focused regret that people have at the end of their lives is **not pursuing more happiness**. She explains that many people postpone their happiness by tying it to future events, such as getting a better job or living arrangement. For example, you may think you'll finally be happy once you buy a house or move out of

your hometown. But Ware argues that happiness is a state you can create now, not something to unlock in the future. Waiting for external situations beyond your control to make you happy only delays joy.

(Shortform note: It may not be realistic to spend money with abandon on things that will make you happy, such as a dream vacation, but hedge-fund manager Bill Perkins argues that you should spend all your money before you die. The key is to balance saving for the future while enjoying life in the present. In *Die With Zero*, he writes that instead of waiting to use your money in the future, you should consider whether using it now will create positive experiences and relationships that can contribute to your overall happiness. For example, rather than squirreling away every paycheck and waiting until you're retired to take that vacation, go on holiday now while you're young and healthy enough to fully enjoy it.)

Ware notes that some people don't let themselves be happy because they feel undeserving or believe happiness must be earned. However, happiness isn't a luxury or a limited resource—it's freely available to everyone. Recognize that you deserve happiness, let go of limiting beliefs, and give yourself permission to be happy.

(Shortform note: One reason you may not believe you deserve happiness is low self-esteem. In *The Six Pillars of Self-Esteem*, psychologist Nathaniel Branden says self-esteem is a combination of *self-efficacy* (believing in your capability) and *self-respect* (believing you deserve happiness), and that low self-esteem contributes to most psychological issues, while high self-esteem leads to greater achievement and happiness. To improve your self-esteem and feel deserving of happiness, you should practice six pillars: Live with awareness, accept yourself, take responsibility, assert yourself, live intentionally, and act with integrity.)

### Choose Happiness

In her discussions with a client named Lenny, Ware learned that happiness is, to some degree, a choice. Despite losing his wife and three of his children, Lenny felt content with his life because he gave and received love freely. In doing so, he could look back on a life well lived.

(Shortform note: In *The How of Happiness*, Sonja Lyubomirsky says that 50% of happiness is determined by your genes and 10% by your life circumstances, but 40% comes from your thoughts and actions. This means that even if you have a genetic disposition toward unhappiness or face difficult circumstances in life, doing things that boost happiness (like nurturing relationships and pursuing meaningful goals) can make you happier each day. Lenny exemplifies this: Despite losing loved ones, he focused on giving and receiving love, which allowed him to feel satisfied when reflecting on his life.)

Ware argues that people often overlook chances to feel happy, and she encourages you **to make conscious choices to be happier**. This doesn't mean forcing yourself to be happy when things are hard, but understanding that you have control over your focus. You can choose to dwell less on bad things and more on good things. Make small choices

to notice things to be grateful for or find things that can make you smile, even when times are hard. For example, you could save funny YouTube videos that always make you laugh and watch them when you're stressed.

(Shortform note: In *The Happiness Advantage*, Shawn Achor writes that you can train your brain to be happier by creating a "Positive Tetris Effect". Just as Tetris players start to see objects in their everyday life as shapes they need to fit into gaps, you can train your brain to focus on positives instead of negatives. To do this, Achor suggests you write down three things you're grateful for each day and spend 20 minutes writing about a positive experience three times a week. These practices can increase your happiness, gratitude, and optimism over time. Like Ware, Achor argues that the goal isn't to ignore problems, but to focus on positive things.)

## Regrets About the People in Your Life

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The second type of regret Ware's patients expressed was regrets they had about how they treated people in their lives. They felt that they failed to properly nurture the important connections in their lives and **wished they'd prioritized relationships more**. In the following sections, we'll discuss regrets about relationships and lessons on maintaining a healthy work-life balance, communicating openly with loved ones, and nurturing meaningful friendships.

### The Regret of Putting Work Before Relationships

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One common regret that Ware's patients had was **spending too much time working instead of spending time with people they cared about**. In their final days, many of her patients wished they had prioritized their loved ones instead of their careers and material success.

(Shortform note: Carving out small pockets of fun, memorable time spent with loved ones can help you avoid this regret. In *The Happiness Project*, Gretchen Rubin suggests that in the midst of seemingly urgent tasks in your everyday life, you should spare a few moments for goofiness. When you choose to be goofy, it boosts everyone's mood and happiness, allowing you to enjoy even the smallest activities with your loved ones. For example, instead of rushing your kids to school in the morning, consider spending a few minutes being silly with them, such as having a dance party while getting dressed.)

To illustrate, Ware shares the story of John, who deeply regretted having dedicated so much of his life to his work. For years, his wife wanted him to retire so they could travel together, but John enjoyed the sense of importance that came with his job and kept putting it off. Months before his scheduled retirement, his wife fell ill and passed away. Nearing the end of his own life, John told Ware that he wished he'd found a better work-life balance.

(Shortform note: Research shows that workers 65 years of age and older, as well as those with higher incomes, tend to be the most satisfied with their jobs overall, which may explain why John kept putting off retirement against his wife's desires. However, in our

modern “hustle culture,” there are growing movements pushing back against this tendency to overwork and neglect other areas of life. In China, many young people are “lying flat” (or *tang ping*)—rejecting societal pressures to overwork and compete, and instead living minimally and prioritizing simple pleasures. Also, the Great Resignation in the wake of Covid-19 saw millions quitting their jobs to pursue better work-life balance or more meaningful work.)

### Simplify Your Life

To avoid the regret of working too much, Ware recommends you **simplify your life by reflecting on what you need and getting rid of what you don’t**. She explains that getting caught up in chasing material success—such as having a bigger house or the latest technology—can cause you to overvalue work and lose focus on other things that matter to you. Instead, focus on the quality of your *life* rather than the quality of your *possessions*. In doing so, you can find a healthier balance between work and personal life and avoid the regret that comes from valuing the wrong things.

(Shortform note: In *Rest Is Resistance*, Tricia Hersey argues that modern societal norms, built upon a foundation of capitalism and white supremacy, has created a “grind culture” that treats people like machines, valuing them only for their productivity and wealth. This relentless pressure to achieve forces you to work nonstop and robs you of essential human experiences, like rest, leisure, and using your imagination. Hersey urges you to fight back against grind culture: Recognize that rest is a fundamental need, not a luxury, and prioritize it over material success.)

### Work With Purpose

In addition to finding a better work-life balance, Ware also recommends you **find work that aligns with your purpose**. Some of Ware’s patients regretted doing the *wrong* work for too long. When you do work that you’re passionate about, you contribute more to the world. This kind of work stops feeling like work. Instead, it becomes a natural expression of who you are, and it also attracts the greatest rewards.

### Humans Are Driven by Meaning

In *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Viktor E. Frankl writes that humans are primarily motivated by the search for meaning, not wealth. He cites a study that showed 78% of college students considered finding purpose in life more important than making a lot of money.

Frankl adds that true meaning is found outside of ourselves—in the world and in service to others—echoing Ware’s suggestion to do work you feel passionate about. Recognize, however, that finding meaningful work likely won’t be easy, and embrace the challenges you face on your journey. According to Frankl, you’ll feel tension between where you are and where you want to be, but this conflict is what pushes you to grow, improve, and accomplish worthy goals. As Ware’s patients realized, the effort is worth it to avoid the regret of spending too long in the wrong job.

## The Regret of Not Sharing Honest Feelings

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Ware writes that another regret many of her patients had was **not being brave enough to be honest about their feelings**.

Her client, Jozsef, spent most of his life working and keeping his family at a distance because he was afraid to open up and show his feelings. Later in life, he realized that by not being honest, he'd missed out on the closeness, warmth, and love that come from communicating openly with others. In the end, he told Ware that he wished his family could truly know and understand who he was as a person.

(Shortform note: The struggle to be emotionally close with others is known as emotional detachment. People who are emotionally detached may find it hard to create or maintain relationships, express affection, or even want to be around others. They might also struggle to empathize with others or share their own emotions. For some people, emotional detachment is a voluntary coping mechanism to avoid pain or stress. But others develop emotional detachment as a result of traumatic experiences or underlying psychological conditions. You can treat emotional detachment through therapies like cognitive-behavioral therapy or acceptance and commitment therapy, which help address the mindsets and behaviors that lead to emotional detachment.)

While holding back your feelings can feel safer and easier in vulnerable moments, says Ware, it prevents you from building stronger relationships with others and being understood for who you really are. Words left unsaid create barriers because they prevent others from being able to understand you and respond to your real feelings and needs. Ware argues that honest communication, especially about difficult topics, deepens your relationships. For instance, Ware spoke honestly with her grandmother about her grandmother's old age and the thought of losing her. This allowed them to say everything they wanted the other person to know, share meaningful thoughts, and appreciate each other.

(Shortform note: Expressing your true feelings is necessary to achieve what Brené Brown calls "true belonging." In *Braving the Wilderness*, Brown explains that true belonging means being genuine about what you think and feel, even if it goes against what others expect of you. It's the opposite of just trying to fit in by hiding parts of yourself. Speaking your truth comes with risks and rewards: You might face judgment or rejection from others, but you also open the door to deeper, more meaningful connections, thoughtful discussions, and inner peace. As Brown puts it, striving for true belonging is like venturing into the "wilderness"—it can be intimidating to trek through, but it leads to the most fulfilling experiences.)

### Speak Your Mind

Ware writes that constantly worrying about how others might react prevents us from speaking our minds. To avoid the regret of not sharing your honest feelings, Ware suggests you **openly express your emotions like children do**—they never hesitate to show how they're feeling, whether they're happy, sad, or angry. Ware acknowledges that

not everyone will react well to your honesty; for example, some might end their relationships with you. But others' reactions can help you distinguish positive, healthy relationships from superficial ones. By being honest, you can be sure that the relationships that remain are based on mutual respect and understanding.

(Shortform note: You can better express your feelings to others by expanding your emotional vocabulary. In *Atlas of the Heart*, Brené Brown describes 87 emotions to help you understand and communicate the wide spectrum of emotions you can experience. She points out that many people can only name three basic emotions: happiness, sadness, and anger. This limited vocabulary prevents people from fully sharing their experiences with others. Learning more words to describe how you feel can make it easier to express yourself honestly and accurately, allowing you to form deeper connections with others.)

### The Regret of Losing Touch With Friends

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Ware writes that many of her patients regretted **not trying harder to maintain their friendships**. As people get busy with work and family, friendships often fall by the wayside.

Ware shares how one of her patients, Doris, felt lonely in a nursing home. She didn't have any family around because her daughter was living in a different county, busy with her own life. Doris told Ware that she longed for the company of her friends and wished that she hadn't let her friendships fade. After some research, Ware was able to contact one of Doris's old friends and facilitated a phone call between the two, which lifted Doris's spirits and brought her happiness in her final days.

(Shortform note: Why is it hard to maintain friendships later in life? Experts explain that friendships develop through unplanned interactions and shared experiences, and we simply experience fewer of these as we grow older. While work and family responsibilities get in the way of the 50 to 200 hours it takes to make friends, it's still possible to nurture friendships in adulthood—you just have to be intentional. Organize regular group activities like book clubs, potlucks, or hikes to keep your friendships going strong as you age.)

## Friendships Are Good for Your Health

Spiritual leaders and researchers alike argue that relationships aren't just nice to have—they're essential for our health and happiness. In *The Art of Happiness*, the Dalai Lama asserts that there are two reasons we need other humans: First, we literally depend on other people because they create and provide the goods and services we need to survive, such as our homes, food, and so on. Second, he says we need to interact with other humans to make us happy.

In *The Good Life*, Robert Waldinger and Marc Schulz elaborate on why we need such interactions to be happy: Loneliness is a stress response. For our ancestors, being isolated from the group was dangerous and reduced their chances of survival, so loneliness evolved as an early warning system to motivate them to connect and form relationships with others. Today, we still feel this stress when we're isolated, even if we're not in physical danger. Nurturing our friendships prevents the pain of loneliness and fulfills a deep-rooted need for human connection.

### Recognize the Value of Real Friends

Ware suggests you **recognize the value of real friends**: people who care about you, stick with you through difficult times, and accept you for who you are. She explains that surrounding yourself with the wrong people can leave you feeling lonely, even if you're not alone, because those people don't truly understand or accept you. And unlike family, who may sometimes expect you to be a certain way, real friends are happy with you the way that you are.

Spending time with real friends who share your interests, experiences, and philosophies makes you feel like you belong somewhere and that people care about you. So, when you find a real friend, put in the effort to reach out and maintain your relationship with them.



## The Three Types of Friendship

The real friends that Ware refers to are likely *virtue friends*—the highest of three types of friendship according to Ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle. These friendships are based on mutual care, understanding, and values. The two other types of friendship are *utility*, which are friendships based on what you can do for each other, and *pleasure*, or friendships based on enjoying shared activities.

While friendships of utility and pleasure have their place, Aristotle, like Ware, argues that virtuous friendships are the most fulfilling and important for living a good, happy life. These friendships take time and effort to develop, as they require really getting to know someone, and they're based on selfless care and wanting the best for the other person.

Aristotle points out that you can only maintain a small number of virtue friendships because of the intimacy and commitment they require. So when you find these rare friends who uplift and accept you, invest the time to strengthen those bonds, even if that means having fewer casual friendships.

## Tips for Finding the Courage to Live Authentically

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Now that we've discussed the most common regrets that people have at the end of their lives, let's discuss how to live without regret. Ware argues that **living a life without regret requires vigilance, conscious decisions, and a lot of courage**. She discovered this herself as she went through her own journey, abandoning a steady job in the banking industry for an unconventional life, pursuing songwriting, and caring for patients as a palliative care nurse.

(Shortform note: Ware wrote *The Top Five Regrets of the Dying* in 2011, and today, she continues to inspire people to live life without regret through her vlog, newsletter, and books. In her newsletters, she uses real-life examples to reflect on themes of life, wonder, and self-kindness to motivate people to make the most of the time they have. In her vlog, she documents her slow, off-grid lifestyle, including her journey building and moving into a tiny hempcrete home in the Australian bush.)

In the following sections, we'll discuss three of Ware's tips for finding courage so you can live authentically and regret-free.

### Tip 1: Accept Death as a Normal Part of Life

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Ware writes that in our society, we avoid thinking and talking about death. Because of this, we often don't know how to react when we encounter death in our lives—whether we're facing our own or the death of someone close to us. Ware argues that to live without regret, we must **accept death as a normal, unavoidable part of life**.

(Shortform note: In *Being Mortal*, Atul Gawande says that the decline of multigenerational households has contributed to our reluctance to accept death as a natural part of life. In the past, multiple generations often lived together under one roof, with the elderly living

with their adult children and grandchildren. In this arrangement, younger people witnessed the realities of aging and death up close as older relatives declined and passed away. With the elderly increasingly living apart from younger generations, often in nursing homes, the end of life has become more hidden and unfamiliar, which has left us less equipped to think about and accept death.)

Ware says that though it may feel uncomfortable, acknowledging your mortality gives you courage to live without regret: It reminds you to be intentional with your decisions, discern what truly matters, and live each moment in the most fulfilling way possible. You care less about others' opinions and society's expectations, and you stop chasing things that don't make you happy. For example, when you reflect on death, you see that experiences and relationships hold more value than material possessions. In her work, Ware notes that none of her patients ever wished they'd bought or owned more things—they only cared about how they lived and impacted others.

(Shortform note: The death positivity movement aims to break the silence surrounding death by encouraging open discussions about this inevitable part of life. The movement includes informal gatherings like death cafes where people discuss death, training programs for end-of-life doulas who support the dying, blogs and social media voices that talk openly about death, and tools to help people share their end-of-life wishes with family. Supporters believe that by facing death directly, we can live fuller and less fearful lives, using our limited time more wisely.)

## Tip 2: Choose the Right Environment for You

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To avoid regret, Ware also recommends **choosing environments that match your goals and values**. Your surroundings, such as where you live, work, and spend your time, strongly influence who you become, so you must find the right environments to support you.

Ware shares a story about a younger client that illustrates the impact your environment has on your life. After an accident, her client went into an assisted living facility. Ware noticed that before long, the energy and drive her client once had to learn, grow, and interact with the world began to fade. His new surroundings, whether he realized it or not, affected his mood and outlook.

Ware suggests you select the environments that line up with where you want to go in life and leave those that don't. The right environments can inspire you to grow and be your best, while the wrong environments can make it harder for you to make good choices.

(Shortform note: In *The Compound Effect*, Darren Hardy argues that your environment includes not just your physical surroundings, but also your mind space. To create an environment that helps you reach your goals, you should clear out both physical clutter and what Hardy calls "psychic clutter"—unfinished tasks and unfulfilled commitments that bog you down. He adds that what you allow in your environment tends to multiply, so it's

important not to accept disrespect, poor health, or other negative influences. Protecting your physical, emotional, and mental spaces gives you more peace, creativity, and capacity to focus on your goals.)

### Tip 3: Accept Things Outside of Your Control

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Finally, Ware advises you to **accept things you can't control**. Letting go of your need for control allows you to act courageously. If you recognize that you'll never fully be in control, focus on doing what you can, and trust that things will work out in the end, you'll find it easier to be happy and make good choices, even if they scare you. For example, you can express yourself honestly, knowing that how others respond is out of your hands.

#### Understand the Degrees of Control You Have

Ware's advice echoes ancient Stoic wisdom. As William B. Irvine explains in *A Guide to the Good Life*, the Stoics recognized that basing happiness on factors outside our control sets us up for disappointment. However, this doesn't mean you should live passively —instead, it's about understanding the degrees of control you have.

Some things, like your efforts, are fully in your control. Others, like other people's reactions, are entirely out of your hands. Many things fall in between, like getting a promotion; in these cases, you have partial influence. Irvine suggests caring about and working toward things you partially control, but setting goals based only on what you fully control—for instance, aiming to work efficiently rather than fixating on getting a promotion. This approach reduces your anxiety and, paradoxically, may make your desired outcomes more likely to come true.

To help you accept that you can't control everything, Ware recommends you practice meditation and self-compassion. First, practice meditation to become more aware of your thoughts and feelings. When you pay more attention to your thoughts, you can notice when you're having unhelpful thoughts and replace them with better ones. For example, if you make a mistake at work and start thinking, "I'm a total failure," meditation can help you recognize this unhelpful thought. You can then replace it with a more balanced view like, "I made a mistake, but that doesn't define me. I can learn from this and do better next time."

(Shortform note: Experiment with different types of meditation to find what works best for you. Buddhism offers practices like vipassana (mindfulness) meditation to observe your thoughts without judgment, and metta (lovingkindness) meditation to cultivate compassion. Hinduism and yoga incorporate physical postures, breathing exercises, and concentration techniques to unite mind and body. Western approaches focus on using meditation to manifest goals or improve focus and productivity.)

Second, learn to have self-compassion by being kinder and more accepting of yourself. Self-compassion allows you to accept your situation and limitations, rather than fighting reality and berating yourself for what you can't change. When you're understanding of

yourself, you can make hard decisions with less fear. You know that even if things don't work out perfectly, you'll treat yourself with kindness instead of self-criticism. This frees you to act with more courage and make decisions you won't regret.

(Shortform note: Understanding the Taoist concepts of wu-wei and wu-hsin might help you cultivate more self-compassion. In The Way of Zen, Alan Watts explains that *wu-wei* is when you act spontaneously without trying to interfere with the thoughts or decisions that come naturally to you. He suggests you embrace this principle, as this allows you to experience *wu-hsin*, which translates to “no mind”—a state of un-self-consciousness. In this state of un-self-consciousness, you are content with yourself, knowing that all of your actions and decisions arise from your most natural self.)

### Guided Tour