

Regret Minimisation Framework

Test a significant decision against your future self

Regret Minimisation Framework © 2026 John Bornholt. Licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0), creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0. You may copy, adapt and share this tool, including commercially, if you credit: “Adapted from Regret Minimisation Framework by John Bornholt, from LIFE: Our Uncertain Experiment, uncertaindecisions.com”. Quotations and cited works belong to their authors and are not covered by this licence.

The core insight

In the short term, people more often regret actions that went wrong - things they did and wish they hadn’t. But research has found that over years and decades, the regrets that linger are more often regrets of inaction (Gilovich and Medvec, 1995): the chances not taken, the paths not pursued, the things left unsaid or undone. Fear inflates the short-term cost of acting. Time deflates the long-term cost of failing. This framework exploits that asymmetry: by imagining yourself at the end of your life, and asking which choice you’d regret more. You can prioritise your long-term values over your short-term anxiety.

The Future-Self Test in Step 6 asks you to look five years ahead and then to the end of your life. This framework takes the end-of-life view, and Part 2 checks the time horizons in between.

Cut through short-term fear. Fear in the present looms large. At 80, most fears look small. The framework gives your future self a vote.

Reveal your real values. Which regret bothers you more? The answer tells you what you really care about - not what you say you care about.

Shift the default. The default is usually inaction. This framework makes inaction a conscious choice, not just a drift.

“The framework I found, which made the decision incredibly easy, was what I called - which only a nerd would call - a ‘regret minimization framework.’ So I wanted to project myself forward to age 80 and say, ‘Okay, now I’m looking back on my life. I want to have minimized the number of regrets I have.’ I knew that when I was 80 I was not going to regret having tried this... I knew that if I failed I wouldn’t regret that, but I knew the one thing I might regret is not ever having tried. I knew that that would haunt me every day, and so, when I thought about it that way, it was an incredibly easy decision.”

Jeff Bezos (b. 1964), American entrepreneur and founder of Amazon. Interview with the American Academy of Achievement, San Antonio, Texas, 2001. Transcript published by the Academy of Achievement.

“Most regrets, by the way, are acts of omission and not commission... most everyday, ordinary non-murderers, when they’re 80 years old, their big regrets are omissions.”

Jeff Bezos, interview with Mathias Döpfner, Axel Springer Award, Berlin, April 2018.

SNAPSHOT Your decision

Name:	Date:
The decision - describe it in one or two sentences	
What makes this decision hard?	What values are in tension here?
	e.g. security vs. freedom, loyalty vs. growth, certainty vs. opportunity

If you act and it goes wrong - is it reversible?

- ☐ Largely reversible - I can change course
-
- ☐ Partially reversible - some things can't be undone
-
- ☐ Largely irreversible - this closes doors permanently
-

PART 1 The 80-Year-Old Test

Imagine yourself at eighty, looking back on your life. You have the perspective that only time gives. You can see how things turned out, what mattered and what didn't. In that position - with no more chances to change course - how do you feel about the choice you made at this moment?

Path A - I take this decision	Path B - I do not take this decision
At 80, imagining the life you lived having made this choice: What did it lead to? What did it open up or close off? What do you feel looking back - pride, peace, satisfaction, regret?	At 80, imagining the life you lived having stepped back from this choice: What happened instead? What did you gain? What did you miss? What do you feel looking back - relief, contentment, or something left undone?

At 80, looking back - which choice would you regret more, and why?

Regretting not doing it / Regretting doing it - and this is why...

PART 2 The Regret Audit

Regret changes over time. Something that feels devastating at one month may look trivial at ten years - and vice versa. Map how your regret for each path evolves across time horizons, then look for the pattern.

Looking back from...	Regret of action (I took Path A)	Regret of inaction (I didn't take Path A)	Which regret feels larger?
1 month from now			☐ Action ☐ Inaction
1 year from now			☐ Action ☐ Inaction
10 years from now			☐ Action ☐ Inaction
End of life			☐ Action ☐ Inaction

What is the pattern? Does regret shift as the time horizon extends?

--

If inaction regret grows as the time horizon lengthens, that is the classic pattern. Pay attention to the end-of-life row - it is often the most revealing.

PART 3 What Kind of Regret Are You Facing?

Not all regret is the same. Identifying the type of regret at stake helps you understand what it is really about - and whether the fear behind it is well-founded.

☐ **Regret of action** - I took this risk and it went wrong.

This is the fear talking. It feels vivid now. But research shows it fades faster than you expect (Gilbert et al., 2004) - especially if you tried your best. Ask: is this fear proportionate, or is it magnified by short-term anxiety?

☐ **Regret of inaction** - I didn't take this chance and I wonder "what if".

This is the regret that accumulates. Paths not taken rarely reveal their true cost in the short run - it only becomes clear much later. Ask: will not doing this still feel okay in 20 years?

☐ **Regret about people** - I prioritised the wrong thing and damaged or missed a relationship.

Decisions that affect people we care about carry their own weight. This type of regret is often irreversible in ways that material outcomes are not. Ask: who does this decision affect, and how?

☐ **Regret of meaning** - I didn't live in line with what I valued.

This is the deepest form - the sense that you outsourced your life to safety, approval, or circumstance. Ask: does this choice reflect who I want to be, or just who it's easy to be right now?

Which type of regret is dominant for you here?

Mark the type(s) that feel most relevant, and write a brief note on why.

--

What does each option tell you about your values?

Choosing Path A says:

Choosing Path B says:

PART 4 The Decision

Bring together what the 80-year-old test, the regret audit, and the regret type analysis have shown you. The question is not "will this work?" but "which regret can I live with - and which one can I not?"

What specific fear is driving hesitation?

Describe it precisely - not "it might not work" but what you are afraid of losing or experiencing.

--

Does that fear hold up at the 80-year view?

☐ Yes - this fear is still significant at 80 (proceed with caution)

☐ Partly - it matters now but not at life's end

☐ No - from 80, this fear looks small (the framework suggests acting)

WHAT THIS ADDS TO YOUR VALUES VERDICT (STEP 6)

Take what the regret test has shown you into the Values Verdict in Step 6 of the Decision Cycle questions, which offers four responses:

- ☐ Pass - the option is consistent with your values: proceed to Step 7.

- ☐ Resolve - there is a values tension but it can be addressed: note which value takes precedence and any conditions, then proceed.

- ☐ Accept - there is a values conflict that cannot be fully resolved, but no better option exists or the cost of inaction overrides it: acknowledge the conflict and proceed.

- ☐ Return - the option is fundamentally inconsistent with your values and a better option may exist: go back to Step 4.

If you are not ready to proceed - what would need to be true?

What specific information, condition, or change would shift the regret balance?

One action I can take now to reduce the regret I most fear

Even a small step reduces the "I never even tried" regret - and tests whether the fear was as large as it seemed.

Sources

Gilbert, D. T., Morewedge, C. K., Risen, J. L., & Wilson, T. D. (2004). Looking forward to looking backward: The misprediction of regret. *Psychological Science*, 15(5), 346-350.

Found that people overestimate how much regret they will feel after a disappointing outcome.

Gilovich, T., & Medvec, V. H. (1995). The experience of regret: What, when, and why. *Psychological Review*, 102(2), 379-395.

The finding that long-term regret is more commonly associated with inaction than action.