

## Adults' experiences of moral regret

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### Abstract

Individuals may need to reflect on their past decisions and this process can often be accompanied by feelings of regret. Recognizing and acknowledging these emotions can facilitate personal growth and inform future decision-making. This study aims to explore adults' experiences of moral regret. Phenomenological design, one of the qualitative research approaches, was used in the study. The study involved 15 adult individuals selected through snowball sampling. Data were collected through a semi-structured interview form developed by the researcher and analyzed through thematic analysis using Maxqda 2020. As a result of the analysis, the themes of remorse, nostalgia, and grief emerged. The research findings indicate that adults experience spiritual regrets intensely. The research reveals that adults see spiritual regrets as a learning tool. Based on the results of the research, suggestions for researchers and practitioners were made.

**Keywords:** grief; Moral; nostalgia; regret; remorse.

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## **1. Introduction**

Regret is often associated with life events. As people get older, they may experience more regret (Wrosch & Heckhausen, 2002). Regret can arise from both decisions made and those not made (Fillon et al., 2023). In the former case, a person may regret the outcome of a situation that did not align with their preferences. In the latter case, a person may regret not taking a certain action. Either way, an individual may feel that they could have been in a better position and regret the outcome of a situation (Bacharach, 2023). In both instances, the person questions their decisions and allows themselves an opportunity to prepare for the future (Pink, 2022; Tamura et al., 2022). Emotions in most cases affect moral decisions; meaning being in a negative emotional state can result in a negative moral decision and vice versa (Martinez et al., 2024). In summary, although regret is generally considered negative, it can serve a useful purpose in planning for the future (Sayar, 2022; Nunner-Winkler & Sodian, 2022).

Regret is theoretically developed based on behavioral consequences, which can be categorized as either acting or not acting. According to Zeelenberg et al. (2002), regret resulting from inaction is viewed more positively than regret resulting from action. Counseling should address both taking action and not taking action. When experiencing regret, it is important to review the possibility of changing the outcome. In this case, there are two types of regret: Closed-door regret and open-door regret. Closed-door regret refers to situations where you cannot act and change the outcome, while open-door regret refers to situations where there is the possibility to change the outcome. There are four forms of regret: basic, courage, moral, and connection. Basic regrets are related to personal development, while courage regrets involve taking risks. Moral regrets are used to prompt remorse and encourage corrective action. Connection regrets, on the other hand, involve repairing interpersonal relationships (Oam, 2023; Pink, 2022).

Pink (2022) argues that moral regrets stem from the desire to do good. Regrets in life can serve as valuable lessons. The concept of doing the right thing when uncertain is based on this principle. The moral foundation's theory posits that regrets stem from a preference for the negative of two polar opposite components. These components include care/harm, fairness/cheating, loyalty/disloyalty, authority/subversion, and purity/desecration. Moral foundations theory provides a descriptive classification of these poles.

### **1.1. Purpose of study**

Within the cultural context, there exist three distinct types of moral regret: Nostalgia, remorse, and grief. Nostalgia refers to the longing and regret for an action that was performed. Remorse, on the other hand, involves regret for an action that was not performed. Grief involves a negative cognitive evaluation. Nostalgia relates to open-door regret, while remorse links to closed-door regret. Grief relationships cognitive regret. Nostalgia is related to care/harm and loyalty/disloyalty, grief is related to fairness/cheating, and remorse is related to authority/subversion and purity/desecration (Plutchick, 2003). Moral regret is a phenomenon little known to adults. The purpose of this study was to explore the moral regret experiences of adults, based on the results and suggestions found in the literature.

## **2. Methods and materials**

### **2.1. Participants**

This research is based on a phenomenological design from qualitative research approaches. With this design, it was tried to reveal the spiritual regret experiences of adults (Creswell, 2015). The study participants were selected using snowball sampling, one of the purposive sampling methods. Purposive sampling involves selecting information-rich sources in line with the research purpose to enable in-depth research. Snowball sampling involves contacting one person in the universe and then contacting another person through this person to collect data (Creswell 2015; Patton, 2018; Yildirim, & Şimşek, 2018). The study included adults with varying socio-economic and educational backgrounds, as outlined in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Participants Characteristics*

Code	Gender	Age	Occupation	Perceived Income Level	Education Level
P1	Male	49	Data preparation officer	Middle	High School
P2	Male	35	Self-employment	Low	University
P3	Male	56	Worker	Middle	Primary School
P4	Male	51	Housekeeping	Low	High School
P5	Male	40	Engineer	High	University
P6	Male	38	Officer	Middle	University
P7	Male	39	Officer	Middle	University
P8	Male	46	Self-employment	Low	Primary School
P9	Male	40	Worker	Low	High School
P10	Male	45	Baker	Low	Primary School
P11	Male	38	Tradesmen	Low	High School
P12	Female	41	Housewife	Low	Primary School
P13	Male	42	Teacher	High	University
P14	Female	41	Teacher	High	University
P15	Female	53	Nurse	High	University

**2.2. Data collection instrument**

The study utilized a semi-structured interview form to gather data. The first section of the form requested personal information, including gender and age. The second section consisted of questions regarding moral regrets (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018).

**2.3. Data analysis**

The study's data was analyzed using the thematic analysis method and Maxqda 2020 software. Thematic analysis is a qualitative method that organizes data into small dimensions, describes it in depth, and reveals patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Creswell, 2017). The raw data was first familiarized, then initial codes were created, and themes were identified. The themes underwent review, followed by a study to define and name them. Finally, a report was prepared (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

**2.3.1. Validity and reliability**

This study utilized multiple data sources, including written field notes (transcripts) and mutual evaluations after the evaluation of the open-ended questionnaire, to ensure validity. To ensure reliability, the findings obtained from the open-ended question were compared with the conceptual framework of the online child abuse phenomenon throughout the research period. The inter-coder reliability coefficient was found to be high ( $r = 0.76$ ), as calculated by Rädiker and Kuckartz (2020). The research process was explained in detail to ensure high reliability. The data were visualized to enhance their detail and comprehensibility.

**3. Results**

As a result of the thematic analysis method carried out within the scope of the research, three themes were reached. These themes were named as a) remorse, b) nostalgia, and c) grief. Sample participant opinions on each theme are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Participants' Opinions on Themes*

Themes	Participants' Opinions
Remorse	<p><b>P1:</b> <i>I wish I had not missed my prayers. I wish I could help more people.</i></p> <p><b>P5:</b> <i>When I look back, I feel very sad and regretful. I question my life.</i></p> <p><b>P8:</b> <i>I pray now, but I made many mistakes when I was young. I drank alcohol and smoked marijuana. I did not care about the world then.</i></p> <p><b>P12:</b> <i>I wanted to be a good person, but it was too late.</i></p>

Nostalgia	<p><b>P5:</b> <i>I feel sorry for the mistakes I made.</i></p> <p><b>P11:</b> <i>I still hurt them, so I am sorry for that. I wish I could be a little calmer and more moderate, but I cannot. It is like there is pressure on me. It is as if that pressure causes me to hurt people.</i></p> <p><b>P12:</b> <i>I regret that I hurt some people when they didn't deserve it. Now I try to make more on-the-spot decisions as much as possible.</i></p> <p><b>P14:</b> <i>There are times when I miss the morning prayers a lot. I feel sad when I think about it.</i></p>
Grief	<p><b>P1:</b> <i>I regret that I hurt someone when I was young.</i></p> <p><b>P4:</b> <i>I would help a student if I could.</i></p> <p><b>P5:</b> <i>I can't enjoy anything because I always put it off. I wish I never put it off.</i></p> <p><b>P6:</b> <i>I never feel ready for the hereafter. I wish I could start praying. After all, we do not know how long we will live in this world.</i></p> <p><b>P10:</b> <i>I wish I had strong religious ties. I could have been a little more religious in my life experience.</i></p>

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#### 4. Conclusion

The focus of this study is to examine moral regrets through the eyes of adults. The study identified three themes related to moral regret: Nostalgia, remorse, and grief. Nostalgia is the expression of regret and longing for a past action. However, remorse often includes regret for actions not taken. Grief is characterized by a poor cognitive assessment. The research findings indicate that adults experience moral regrets intensely. The research reveals that adults see moral regrets as a learning tool.

In the context of the study's results and limitations, a few suggestions can be made. Firstly, regarding the sample, the study was conducted with parents aged between 35 and 53. In future studies, working with adults from different age groups may provide more comprehensive results. Secondly, this study employed a phenomenological design and snowball sampling method. To improve the generalizability of future studies, it is recommended to use an exploratory sequential design and nested sampling method in mixed research designs.

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