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How to Get Past Midlife Regret

When your past and future collide, the "what ifs" can feel paralyzing. Ask yourself these questions to move forward.

By Lisa Arbetter Published: Mar 03, 2026 2:28 PM EST

SAVE ARTICLE

Lorraine (last name withheld) felt the future she'd always counted on beginning to slip away.

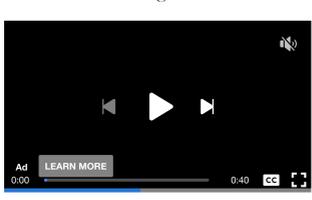
"I spent way too much time in my 30s counting on a toxic relationship to turn into something other than a toxic relationship," she says. "Now I'm 40, with no kids, trying to figure out how to still make that dream of having a family happen."

Regrets about things we didn't do—regrets of inaction like Lorraine's—tend to linger longer than regrets about things we did, according to research. That can leave midlife crowded with "what ifs." Yet it is also the stretch of life when clarity and possibility coexist: We can finally see how our patterns shaped those earlier decisions, and more important, we still have time to change.

"Midlife is the hinge point between the first half and the second half of our lives. Who we were before and who we want to become...presses in on us from both sides," writes Margie Lachman, PhD, a psychology professor, director of the Lifespan Lab at Brandeis University, and author of the forthcoming book *Primetime: A New Vision for Midlife*.

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When Your Life No Longer Fits

Betsy Ames, 65, knows this inflection point well. She was living what she describes as a "shallow existence" as a housewife in a tony New Jersey suburb, "very focused on what I sounded like, what I looked like, what I wore," she says. "But I knew I was deeper than the way I was behaving."

That dissonance followed her for years—through sobriety and through divorce—until, in midlife, she hit a wall. "I just couldn't do it anymore," she says. "It felt meaningless." At 59, she earned a master's degree in social work and started over as a therapist. "I found a foundation for a new life that was much deeper, much slower-moving, and much less concerned with shiny objects," she says.

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I KNEW I WAS DEEPER THAN THE WAY I WAS BEHAVING.

Looking back, Ames realized she had been underestimating herself for decades. When she was a child, an adult told her she was stupid—and she believed it. "I carried that with me until I graduated from Fordham in May 2020," she says.

A New Perspective

Today, Ames no longer sees her earlier choices as mistakes so much as part of a longer arc. "I think it took everything to get to where I am now—the pain, the joy, the satisfaction," she says. That reframing is common in midlife. Regret doesn't disappear. It evolves. What once felt like failure can become part of the story that shaped you.

"Younger adults experience regret as almost entirely negative," says Laura L. Carstensen, PhD, a professor of public policy at Stanford University and founding director of the Stanford Center on Longevity. "They feel bad, and that's it. But as people age, regret often turns into something good. There's a lesson to be learned in regret."

But first, you have to acknowledge it—and engage with it. Then you can make a conscious decision about what to do with it.

Don't Just Sit There—Act or Adapt

Eventually, regret asks something of you.

Left unchecked, it can turn into rumination—replaying the same "if only" thoughts without resolution—which research has linked to chronic stress, depression, and even physical health problems. But when people actively engage with regret, it often becomes clarifying.

The question is: Can this still be changed?

Sometimes the answer is yes. People shift careers. Leave relationships. Reimagine family. Take action where opportunity still exists.

WHEN PEOPLE ACTIVELY ENGAGE WITH REGRET, IT OFTEN BECOMES CLARIFYING.

Other times, the answer is no. A door has closed. In those cases, growth comes from adapting—letting go of the outcome while finding new ways to meet the deeper need underneath it.

Psychologists suggest asking yourself: What was I really trying to achieve? Often what looks like a single regret—the relationship that didn't work out, the career not pursued—is really about something deeper: connection, purpose, autonomy, meaning.

Lorraine is navigating that line now. What she wanted wasn't simply a relationship—it was the life she believed it would lead to: partnership and motherhood together. Sitting with regret helped her separate the two. She's now exploring the possibility of becoming a mother on her own.

She hasn't made her decision yet. But something has already shifted.

"Since I've stepped back from dating, I have literally been pouring all that love I was trying to pour into other people into myself," she says. "And although I might be single right now, I really do have a different kind of love and respect for myself that I've never had before."

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