

regret becomes helpful is when it guides our behaviour to bring it more in line with our values,' Thomas says. 'It can be functional if it moves you towards repair.'

Regret is often mixed with other emotions, such as shame, guilt, or embarrassment. Psychotherapist Karin Peeters tells me about the difference between regret and remorse: 'Regret is about oneself, while remorse is about feeling deeply sorry for another person who was involved in a situation,' she explains.

Of course, not all regrets involve another person, but when we have hurt someone, even accidentally, this remorse can be painful. However, we can use it positively: 'With remorse, very often we feel the desire to apologise, and that is so incredibly healing,' explains Peeters. It can help us take stock of how we act towards others, and look at improving relationships where there has been past hurt.

Often, we regret missed opportunities – for example, the holiday with friends we decided not to go on then wished we had when we saw the photos on social media. It can help, Thomas says, to see if there are patterns in our regrets. Do you have a tendency to turn things down, and then later wish you hadn't? Thomas says: 'We can bring a growth mindset to it, asking ourselves, "What is it that I need to learn?", "What is it that I'm not doing that I could start doing to learn from this?". And that's where we can look at failure and mistakes as learning opportunities to tweak what we're doing, to change ourselves for a different future.'

Peeters, too, highlights the importance of finding patterns: 'Often, there is a common denominator in the things that our thoughts get hooked onto,' she explains. You may blame yourself for forgetting a friend's birthday, or making the wrong career move, or being in a bad relationship. The common denominator here could be that you think 'It's my fault', or 'I'm not good enough'. Recognising what this underlying thought is, Peeters says, can help you address this root cause of your regrets, such as self-doubt, anxiety, or being overly critical of yourself.

Moving forwards

While writing this article, I keep thinking of a friend who recently took a new job that meant leaving an employer she liked, but was, she thought, something that sounded great. But, a few weeks in, she realised she had made a terrible mistake. Her new boss was unkind and demanding, it was a toxic environment, and she found the work itself unfulfilling. She was quickly swallowed up by regret, wishing she could go back and warn her past self. She has now managed to find another role, but is still angry at herself for her decisions.

'It's really important to consider that when we look back, we fall into a trap called hindsight bias,' explains Thomas. 'We sit here with all the information we have at hand in the present moment and we think, "Why did I do that?". But we can only ever act on the

information we have in the moment, which is now the past. We beat ourselves up, yet we didn't then have access to the knowledge we have now, and had no idea how events would unravel.'

As much as my friend is upset, there was no way she could have known what things would be like. We chat about it over coffee, and suddenly – wonderfully – she smiles, as she shares how she has learnt about herself from the experience. Feeling content and happy in a workplace is important to her, she's realised. She's still ambitious, but what she's been through has helped her reflect on how she will approach applying for new jobs. In scenarios like this, the idea of hindsight bias reminds us to be compassionate to ourselves, and to realise what it was about the decision we made that didn't work for us, and how we may act differently next time.

Peeters tells me about a technique she uses with clients where she asks them to play out a court case where the thing they have done or not done is being scrutinised. 'You can get a really nice overview of what there is to learn, and what the causes and conditions were that brought you to the circumstance,' says Peeters. 'So it brings a lot of understanding and softness of the bigger picture, and why somebody did what they did.' This can also help you forgive yourself and show self-compassion.

It is helpful, according to Peeters, to look at the intention behind why we did something. 'When we regret something, we look at the result, and the outcome is very often not under our control. But if we can look back at the original intention, and find it was good, then that's something to really hold onto.'

Dealing with regretful thoughts

As hard as we try to move on, regrets can still spiral in our minds as we try to sleep. What can we do in this situation? Firstly, Thomas says, accept that these thoughts are there. She compares the feeling of regret to a cat sitting on your bed – it may come and lie down near you, and you're aware of it and acknowledge its presence, but you don't try to push it away or give it attention, you just leave it be.

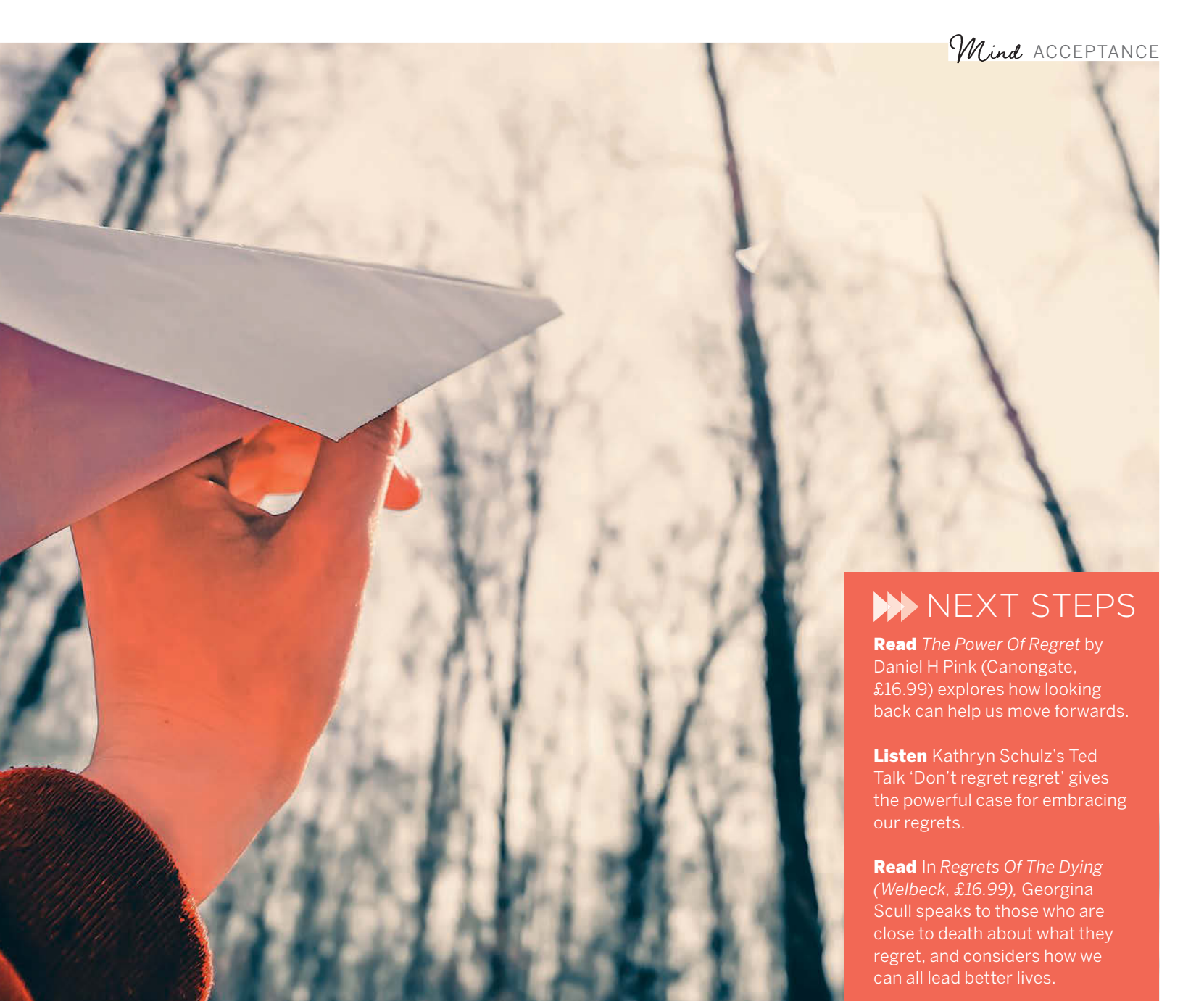
The more you can sit with your feelings of regret, the less scary they get. 'There is a paradox that they actually tend to linger less, if you allow them to come in,' explains Thomas. 'It's like having a beach ball that you try to push down underneath the surface – the more you push it down, the more tension you're using to hold it out of sight. But when you release it and let it bob along next to you, it will eventually drift away.'

As you acknowledge these regrets, you can say to yourself that it is understandable that these thoughts are on your mind. Then, Thomas says, try counting your breaths in and out – if you get distracted, just keep on bringing your thoughts back to the breath.

Lying in the dark, I'm feeling annoyed at myself for a work opportunity I turned down. But I recognise that I have learnt from it – it's taught me to believe



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▶▶ NEXT STEPS

Read *The Power Of Regret* by Daniel H Pink (Canongate, £16.99) explores how looking back can help us move forwards.

Listen Kathryn Schulz's Ted Talk 'Don't regret regret' gives the powerful case for embracing our regrets.

Read *In Regrets Of The Dying* (Welbeck, £16.99), Georgina Scull speaks to those who are close to death about what they regret, and considers how we can all lead better lives.

“Look at failure and mistakes as learning opportunities to tweak what we’re doing, to change ourselves for a different future”

in myself more, because one of the reasons I didn't pursue it is my ever-present imposter syndrome. I've realised now if I were to face a similar opportunity, I would explore it more. This way of thinking helps me stop beating myself up over it: I grow from it.

As the regret turns round my head, I acknowledge it, like the weight of a cat curled beside me, and that the reason it is there is because it's about something that matters to me. I tell myself it is okay to have these thoughts, and then focus on my breathing, the warm tickle of air in and out of my nostrils. The regret doesn't just disappear, but I'm able to gently shift my focus onto something else. I feel calmer, more content, and yes, I manage to drift off to sleep not long after.

Regrets are a part of life – they can eat us up or leave us fearful – but we can use them to better understand ourselves, and to make changes that are right for us.