

ADVERTISEMENT

OPINION

LINDSAY CROUSE

A 63-Year-Old Runner Changed the Way I Think About Regret

April 24, 2022



Hokyoung Kim

[Give this article](#) [Share](#) [Bookmark](#) [345](#)**By Lindsay Crouse**

Ms. Crouse is a writer and producer in Opinion who focuses on gender, ambition and power.

American culture is saturated with advice on managing regret — which generally amounts to pretending we don’t experience it. The Library of Congress lists some 50 books with “No Regrets” in the title. Hashtags with the same slogan splay across Instagram reels and pastel-painted particle board on Etsy.

The message is clear: Regret is self-defeating, backward-looking, a negative feeling to avoid at all costs.

But for [Mariko Yugeta](#), regret has been a propellant. At 63, the Japanese athlete has quietly become the fastest woman in her age group ever to finish a marathon. She’s a sexagenarian who is beating the times she chased as a promising amateur athlete in her 20s.

After putting her athletic goals aside for decades to raise children and pursue a full-time career, in 2019 she became the first woman over 60 to run a marathon in under three hours. In January 2021, at age 62, she ran her fastest marathon ever, in 2:52:13 — meaning the world records she’s now breaking are the ones she set.

As Yugeta reclaims the dreams she once abandoned, she says her athletic breakthrough is “fueled by regret.”

“I don’t think the feeling of regret is a negative emotion,” Yugeta told me. “What’s negative are thoughts like, ‘I can’t run fast anymore’ or ‘I’m too old to do this,’ and I think that it’s an entirely positive way to live, to use any regrets you might have as motivation to achieve a goal.”

Yugeta didn’t ever stop wanting to win, she explained. “I’ve always wanted to be No. 1,” she told me. “That’s what’s gotten me out the door on rainy and windy days.”

I’d never heard of someone with a comeback story quite like Yugeta’s, which strikes me as a case study in how regret doesn’t have to drag us down. Used the right way, it can inspire us.

Of course, there’s a reason we put so much effort into denying regret: The feeling can be corrosive. One study on the topic [asked participants](#) to describe their “most burdensome regret” before bed. If you’ve ever done this voluntarily, it won’t surprise you to learn that those subjects [took 61 percent longer](#) to fall asleep than those who simply pictured an ordinary day.

Yugeta shows what happens when we think differently. Her story tracks with the research of the author Daniel Pink, who spent the early part of the coronavirus pandemic helping conduct a huge quantitative analysis on regret — a popular theme during that period. His website, [World Regret Survey](#), has collected more than 19,000 regrets from people in 105 countries.

Among the [most common regrets](#) people recounted, as described in Mr. Pink’s recent book, “The Power of Regret: How Looking Backward Moves Us Forward,” were “not pursuing higher education (or not taking it seriously enough), turning down opportunities to travel, and missing final chances to connect with loved ones.” Another common one: not ending a bad marriage. Mr. Pink’s findings suggest that we tend to regret what we didn’t do far more than what we did. Psychologists call those “regrets of omission,” as opposed to “regrets of commission.” Mostly, we regret playing it safe.

That’s ironic, considering the lengths to which we go to prevent feeling regret. All that effort we put into avoiding risk and discomfort might have the opposite of the effect we seek. As Mr. Pink writes, dousing ourselves in exclusively positive emotions stifles growth. It’s the negative feelings that drive us to change.

“We need plenty of positive emotions in our portfolio. They should outnumber the negative ones,” writes Mr. Pink. “Yet overweighting our emotional investments with too much positivity brings its own dangers. The imbalance can inhibit learning, stymie growth and limit our potential. That’s because negative emotions are essential, too. They help us survive.”

Mr. Pink’s findings depict life as an endless decision tree, where we’re compelled to pick one path to the exclusion of all others. As explored in the recently released film “[Everything Everywhere All at Once](#),” the result can feel like a multiverse of the lives we didn’t live.

Joshua Rothman discussed a similar idea in a 2020 essay for The New Yorker, “[What if You Could Do It All Over?](#)” “We have unlived lives for all sorts of reasons: because we make choices; because society constrains us; because events force our hand; most of all, because we are singular individuals, becoming more so with time,” Mr. Rothman wrote. “Even as we regret who we haven’t become, we value who we are. We seem to find meaning in what’s never happened.”

Yugeta told me about one branching point on her own tree. “When I was young, I wanted to go to the Olympics,” she told me. “The regret I had about not making the Olympics was that in order to get there you had to be No. 1 in Japan, and I wasn’t.” She fell short of a rival she would ordinarily beat, who ultimately earned the spot on the Olympic team that Yugeta coveted.

“When she was named to the team I was full of jealousy,” Yugeta said. “I think that feeling is part of what makes me what I am today.” What she is today, of course, is someone who has confounded conventional narratives of aging while becoming the fastest woman her age in the world.

For years, Yugeta prioritized opportunities in her life that brought different fulfillment: marriage, four children and her job as a high school physical education teacher in Saitama, near Tokyo. Consumed by these obligations, she only returned to training again in her 50s, once her children were grown. It was time to see what might be left.

She joined a club and began studying the training approach of the fastest man in the world, Eliud Kipchoge of Kenya, incorporating the tactics and products he used into her own regimen. In 2017, when she was 58, she finally achieved the athletic goal she’d had her entire life: running a marathon in under three hours. Her first world record for her age group came two years later. Now she’s making up for lost time: She’s [aiming for 150 marathons](#) before she stops running.

Her 115th was on Monday, at the Boston Marathon, where she had hopes of breaking her own record. Instead, she was vanquished by the hills and ran it in 3:06:27. But acknowledging her age, and the physical limits that generally accompany it, has been freeing. And while she may regret what she left undone in her 20s, she accepts the choices she made.

“It’s a waste of time to think about days gone by,” she said. “What’s important is the here and now, and the future. How can you improve yourself in the days to come?”

Lindsay Crouse ([@lindsaycrouse](#)) is a writer and producer in Opinion who focuses on gender, ambition and power. She produced the Emmy-nominated Opinion Video series “[Equal Play](#),” which brought widespread reform to women’s sports.

The Times is committed to publishing [a diversity of letters](#) to the editor. We’d like to hear what you think about this or any of our articles. Here are some [tips](#). And here’s our email: [letters@nytimes.com](#).

Follow The New York Times Opinion section on [Facebook](#), [Twitter \(@NYTopinion\)](#) and [Instagram](#).

ADVERTISEMENT