

Embracing Embarrassment

By: Kate Ferenchick

We have all experienced embarrassment. Feeling ashamed of what you said or have done, feeling a pit in your stomach, and not sure how it will play out. This may come from making a bold move, sending something risky, or doing what you love without assurance that people will act positive. When embarrassment hits and does not pay off, it makes one feel vulnerable and naturally, suffer from this. Hence, many humans have learned to be cautious, and they have become in control of their actions; they will stop before making risky moves and “be safe”. However, this triggers a worse emotion that lives with you far longer: regret.

Embarrassment tends to be short-term and in my belief, a choice. The feeling is very real, but simultaneously one may choose how much it impacts them. You can opt to dwell in your “mess up” (if you can even call it that) or move on and be proud that you took a risk, even if it did not work out. On the other end, regret lingers with you in the form of “what if?”, consuming your mind. Regret gives short-term relief compared to embarrassment, but builds up slowly and stays longer.

From my own experience, it is significantly simpler to accept embarrassment and move on, even a bit proud that you took the risk. It is easy to TELL yourself to move on from the regret of not taking an action, but the question always sticks: What if I said/did that? It manifests into your mind, and slowly becomes an identity you hold. You see yourself as someone who didn’t act. It may positively change your view and decide to take future action (so eventually picking embarrassment), but often that initial regret holds a heavy weight on you.

So why do people frequently choose missed opportunities over risks? They like control.

Humans appreciate the idea that they are able to curate a response by not taking the action altogether. They seek out ways to control their life, even if it ultimately hurts them. Embarrassment forces a lack of control, which humans often do not opt for. The payoff may be higher, but so are the chances of suffering. Therefore, failing to act seems like a safer option, despite the later regret one may carry with them. It feels like the more rational choice in the short-term, and so we take it.

However, the choice of regret is more dangerous in a sense. Regret forces its way into us long-term and may haunt one for not taking the action. It plants seeds and forces us to deal with the suffering. It is a paradox: Embarrassment causes more short-term suffering than regret, but regret leads to more suffering in the end. As a Political Science and History student, the Federalist Papers are a great example: the authors took a large risk to their reputation by defending the Constitution, and it paid off.

We are so stuck in the future outcome if we fail, we forget what happens if we succeed at a risk. Choosing the possibility of embarrassment over regret seems more hazardous, but oftentimes it allows us to fully experience life without being stuck in the past. Humans must learn to accept this lack of control and possibility of suffering to become our full selves, or be stuck in the state of regret.