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Timur Ioseliani

HOW TO FORGET WHAT CAN'T BE FORGOTTEN

How to Stop Reliving the Past and Break Free from Its Pain



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How to Forget What Can’t Be Forgottenen. How to Stop Reliving the Past and Break Free from Its Pain

«Издательские решения»

Ioseliani T.

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Still replaying a conversation that ended years ago? Why do hurtful words stick when everyday details disappear? After years of teaching people how to remember, Timur Ioseliani faced an unexpected question: How do you learn to forget? With sharp humor, real stories, and accessible science, this book explores why painful memories return — and how to stop letting the past take over your present. You don’t have to erase a memory to loosen its grip.

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How to Forget What Can’t Be Forgottenen How to Stop Reliving the Past and Break Free from Its Pain

Timur Ioseliani

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TIMUR IOSELIANI
HOW TO FORGET
WHAT CAN'T BE FORGOTTEN

How to Stop Reliving What Hurts
A popular-science book about memory, emotion,
and the freedom to move beyond the past

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This book offers popular-science information and practical observations. It does not replace medical diagnosis, psychological assessment, or treatment. When someone faces an immediate threat to safety or a risk of harm to themselves or others, urgent professional help is necessary.

A WORD FROM THE AUTHOR: AN AWKWARD QUESTION

I've spent years teaching people how to remember things. Numbers, names, texts, sequences — all the information that tends to vanish from your head at precisely the moment you're expected to produce it. I have memory records of my own; my students have theirs. You would think my professional life had followed a perfectly straightforward path: people need to remember, and my job is to show them how.

But every so often, someone in a class would ask a question that, as far as I know, nobody had enrolled to ask.

«How do you learn to forget?»

A memory instructor's first impulse is to check whether the student has walked into the wrong room. If you've come to learn how to remember, you're in the right place. If you've come to learn how to forget, perhaps you want the classroom next door. Unfortunately, there was no classroom next door. And the question wasn't frivolous at all.

Some people can't remember where they put their papers. Others can recall something somebody said to them ten years ago and are still preparing the perfect comeback. At least the papers offer hope: they're somewhere in the house. The comeback is a trickier proposition. The other person has moved, changed jobs, perhaps even forgotten your name, and you're still negotiating with them. More successfully every year, of course.

I used to tell students about snow. Walk once across untouched snow and you leave footprints; keep going back and forth and a path forms. Eventually, you have a well-trodden road. We'll come back to that road, the one we create with our own feet. But the longer I considered the students' question, the less satisfied I became with a single answer. It was useful, but it wasn't enough.

Memory isn't a collection of files you can select and delete with a click. Sometimes we revisit an unpleasant episode out of habit. Sometimes a memory appears on its own. Sometimes the situation calls not for forgetting but for action: a conversation, a defense of your rights, a request for help. And sometimes a person spends years blaming themselves for something they can no longer change.

Eventually I realized that we needed a different question. Not «How do I delete a memory?» but «Why does it keep taking me back to a place I don't want to be?» That's the question we'll follow through the oddities of memory, the psychology of repetitive thoughts, and practical ways of keeping yesterday from consuming all of today.

Let me draw a boundary right away. I teach memory techniques; I'm not a physician. This book deals with ordinary memories, resentments, and the habit of carrying on arguments in your head. Severe symptoms after trauma, serious sleep problems, or difficulties that disrupt daily life call

for professional assessment. And when someone is in danger right now, waiting to feel better is no substitute for taking steps to stay safe.

I should probably confess something else. I haven't always wanted to forget. Sometimes I wanted the other person to remember: their mistake, their promise, our unpleasant conversation. Word for word, preferably. Fortunately, human memory isn't nearly accommodating enough to meet demands of that sort.

So this isn't a book about miraculously erasing the past. It's about having the freedom not to return there unless you need to. And about the difference between two statements: «That happened» and «That's still happening to me.»

Let's begin with the question from the classroom.

PART I. WHY WE REMEMBER WHAT WE WANT TO FORGET

CHAPTER 1. TEACH ME HOW TO FORGET!

There's a curious injustice in my line of work. Someone learns to memorize unfamiliar words in class and is delighted. Then they walk out, run into an old grievance, and discover that it needs no training whatsoever. It shows up right on cue, without an instructor's help. Ask that same memory to hold on to a new phone number. Suddenly it's not interested.

People asked about the reverse side of my profession more than once.

«Can we do it the other way around? How do you forget?»

I don't know what particular events my students wanted to forget, and I'm not going to invent confessions on their behalf. But I did have a definite answer. I told them about snow.

Imagine the morning after a snowfall. No road, no footprints. Just an unmarked white surface. You cross the yard and leave a line of prints. Walk back the same way and the marks become more obvious. Make several trips and there's a path. Keep using it and you have a packed-down road visible from a distance.

Now imagine an unpleasant conversation. It ended an hour ago, but inside your head round two is only beginning. You repeat what the other person said. You come up with the right reply. Then a better one. You add circumstances that somehow never made it into the original exchange. Within a week you could defeat your opponent with a single sentence. Only one small problem remains: where to find that opponent, and why on earth they would agree to take part in your brilliant rematch.

Revisiting an episode doesn't automatically strengthen the memory every time; the brain is more complicated than a snowy yard. But repeatedly going over an event can make the route itself familiar: the same phrase, the familiar flare of irritation, the familiar effort to prove you're right. That's how a road forms — not only to the event, but to a habitual way of reacting to it.

In class I used to put my advice rather firmly: if you want to return to something unpleasant less often, stop walking that path again and again. I thought the issue was chiefly self-discipline. Then an important complication became clear: trying to forbid yourself a memory by sheer force can become yet another way of constantly revisiting it. The promise «I will never think about that again» demands inspections. And an inspection reminds you of the very thing you were ordered to forget.

Suppose you give yourself an instruction: «Starting today I will not think of that conversation even once.» You wake up and run a quick check. Is the conversation there? Apparently not. And now it is. The check succeeded in exactly one respect: you found the thing you were checking for.

So I suggest a different distinction. An uninvited memory is one thing; it turns up without asking. Choosing to spend another thirty minutes, another hour, another whole evening on it is something else. We don't always control the first. With the second, we more often have some room to choose — not necessarily much, not always enough, but sometimes just enough to stop yesterday's unpleasantness from taking possession of today.

Suppose an old photograph reminds you of an argument. For a moment it stings. You can acknowledge, «Yes, that happened,» and carry on. Or you can open an investigation: who raised their voice first, what you failed to notice, why nobody admitted you were right, what the only decent conclusion ought to have been. By dinner, the investigation has become a trial. The defendants are absent. You are both prosecutor and judge. The sentence, whatever it is, will not be carried out.

Of course, there are times when returning to an event is necessary. You're working out how to protect yourself if it happens again, trying to understand a mistake, preparing for an honest

conversation, collecting documents. We shouldn't confuse that work with thoughts endlessly spinning in place.

The useful question is not «How do I ban this memory?» but «What changed as a result of thinking about it?» If you've found a new fact, made a decision, or identified a necessary step, you've been working on the problem. If the discussion has reached the same old verdict yet again, you may simply have traveled the familiar route.

I don't call that weakness. The brain doesn't ask whether this happens to be a convenient moment to think about danger, injustice, or unfinished business. Such things may look important to it. Trouble starts when a signal of importance turns into permanent guard duty.

Naturally, the snow image needs careful handling. A road in a field and a trace in memory aren't built the same way. Unwanted memories, particularly those connected with trauma, can return without any decision to «walk the path» again. Blaming someone for a lack of discipline in that situation makes no sense. My metaphor is mainly about the habit of voluntarily, repeatedly working up an unpleasant story.

To begin, notice one thing. Did the episode pop into your mind by itself, or have you already spent several minutes arguing afresh, refining the old lines and inventing new ones? The first is not a failing grade in memory. In the second case, ask whether any real next step has emerged. If so, write it down or take it. If not, return to what's in front of you today. This observation is useful for ordinary everyday difficulties; severe involuntary symptoms call for different help.

Memory has a great many jobs: preserving what matters, warning us about danger, helping us recognize other people and ourselves. Nowhere in its contract does it say that it must reopen proceedings every day over every conversation that ended badly.

There's another detail in the snow picture. You can stop using an old path and still remember exactly where it was. It doesn't have to disappear from your biography. Forgetting a road and no longer traveling down it are two different outcomes. I think we confuse them all the time. Someone says, «I want to forget,» when what they really want is to sleep peacefully, stop arguing with a former boss, or stop flinching at a familiar surname. The burden isn't the fact of remembering; it's the price paid each time they go back.

One day it struck me that when we learn a list of words, I ask students to return to the material, test themselves, and retrieve anything they've missed. That's purposeful repetition. But when someone revisits an old conflict, they usually aren't studying new material. They rehearse the same arguments, while their imaginary opponent — by a remarkable coincidence — remains just as unreasonable as on day one. In one case, repetition helps us learn. In the other, it can become a habit of suffering. A superficially similar activity, with entirely different purposes.

That's why I'm not suggesting you fight every thought that appears. Let it appear. The arrival of a memory doesn't mean you're moving backward. What matters is what happens a second later: did you notice it and get on with your day, or launch an entire television series complete with recaps of previous seasons? That small choice isn't always available, especially in serious distress. But with ordinary daily conflicts, it deserves more attention than trying to lock your memory and throw away the key.

NOT EVERYTHING THAT RETURNS IS SOMETHING WE BROUGHT BACK

Let's agree on the terms. A memory can appear uninvited. You hear a surname, catch a familiar scent, open an old message thread — and suddenly the unpleasant scene is in front of you. That doesn't mean you deliberately summoned it, much less that you lack willpower. What happens afterward is another matter. Sometimes we begin building out the story ourselves: itemizing the injustices, devising replies, calling imaginary witnesses. Very little time passes between the first involuntary flash and the imaginary courtroom proceedings. Psychologically, though, they're different events.

In my snow metaphor, I spoke of a path we tread ourselves. Here's a qualification that probably didn't fit into my brief classroom explanation. Sometimes other people's footprints appear on our

pristine patch of snow. We don't choose every thought, image, or feeling. With ordinary worries, we may sometimes choose whether to continue the walk. For someone experiencing severe consequences of trauma, that freedom may be far more limited. It would be cruel to tell them they are personally building the road back to their suffering every day.

Next time a memory returns, «What am I going to do with this thought now?» is often more helpful than «Why am I thinking about this again?» You might send a practical message. You might check whether the matter is settled. Or you might close the case and make lunch — which, incidentally, is unlikely to prepare itself without you.

BETWEEN A THOUGHT AND THE NEXT STEP

I'm sometimes tempted to offer the simplest possible answer: «Just don't remember it.» As a teacher, I know the appeal of a short instruction. It's convenient for the student and satisfying for the teacher: the principle is clear; now all you have to do is apply it. But if the human mind consistently obeyed two-word instructions, psychologists would need new careers. And humanity might finally get some sleep.

The real difficulty often begins not with the memory itself but with the judgment we attach to it almost instantly. «Here we go again,» we say. Then come the questions: Why do I still remember? What's wrong with me? When will this stop? So on top of the original unpleasant episode, we add another one: an argument with our own memory. Checking every five minutes to see whether a thought has disappeared for good is about as productive as opening the oven door every five minutes to see whether the cake has risen.

There's a gentler approach. An image arises; let it be an image. A line of dialogue surfaces; you don't have to finish a conversation that no longer exists. If action is required, name it precisely: «Write the letter.» «Discuss the contract term.» «Ask for help.» If no action is needed, go back to what you were doing. Not because you must become calm immediately, but because the past shouldn't automatically take every inch of space away from the present.

One last qualification matters to me. The snow principle describes some familiar mental routes. It does not explain every kind of unwanted memory, especially those associated with trauma. A person struggling with flashbacks doesn't need a lecture about how they supposedly trod the path themselves. The metaphor is useful only up to the point where it starts unfairly blaming the reader.

CHAPTER 2. A LIFETIME WARRANTY ON RESENTMENT

Unpleasant memories have an astonishing shelf life. You may forget what your first car cost, where you put the refrigerator warranty, or what year the neighbors renovated their apartment. Yet a remark made in front of witnesses can remain so vivid that you'd think the manufacturer had issued a lifetime guarantee.

Not every hurtful word stays with us forever, of course. Most everyday grievances fade. But certain ones cling with extraordinary determination. Why?

Because memory isn't an impartial security camera. Our attention is drawn to things related to our goals, threats, important relationships, and sense of self. If someone has challenged not merely your opinion about the weather but your dignity, professional reputation, or safety, the episode may acquire a higher priority. Later, a familiar name, place, or tone of voice can be enough to bring it back.

Priority, however, is not the same as accuracy. Here comes a conversation that's uncomfortable for the ego: being absolutely certain of a memory doesn't mean every detail has remained unchanged. We remember its meaning, our reaction, a vivid fragment; the rest may gradually shift. Without noticing it, we sometimes make the story more convincing. Originally the other person made an ambiguous remark. In our mental replay, there is no longer the slightest doubt about their motives.

That doesn't mean we invented the insult. The event may have been entirely real. It's just that memory and a court transcript are different documents.

There's another subtlety. Resentment promises a benefit. Returning to it, we tell ourselves, «If I don't forget, I won't let anyone treat me that way again.» Sometimes remembering does help establish boundaries. But once the lesson has been learned, endless repetition teaches nothing new. We're still paying tuition for a class that ended long ago.

Try separating two things. First, the fact: «Someone spoke to me rudely.» Second, the ongoing mental activity: «I must prove it was wrong and make this absent person finally agree.» The fact may deserve to be remembered — and, in some circumstances, acted on. The second activity often has no end date.

It's worth asking not just «Why do I remember this?» but «What am I hoping to get by returning to it?» An apology? Acknowledgment? Safety? Proof that I wasn't weak? The answer may be uncomfortable, but it gives you something to work with. You can set a boundary, have a conversation when appropriate, stop expecting an admission that will never come, or seek help if the distress has become severe.

The resentment won't necessarily vanish after you've made a sensible decision. The human mind is under no obligation to supply satisfying endings. But the decision now has an address in the present instead of existing solely in the past.

I like comparing an unpleasant memory to an old receipt. The paper itself may be useful: it proves something happened. But taking it out of the drawer every morning, reading it with fresh indignation, and putting it back won't somehow reduce the bill you've already paid.

Keeping evidence and endlessly presenting it to yourself are not the same thing.

When we label a grievance «a memory,» it helps to check whether we've smuggled several separate complaints into it. «Someone said something rude to me» is one. «That person thinks it's acceptable to treat me that way» is another. «Nobody stood up for me» is a third. «Now I'm afraid it might happen again» is a fourth. Each may call for a different response. «Just forget it» is a poor master key: with four locks in front of you, one key labeled POSITIVE THINKING probably won't open all the doors.

Often we demand of memory something it cannot deliver: acknowledgment from another person. Retelling the event a hundred times won't force them to agree. That requires a conversation, evidence, or a decision to stop pursuing agreement where it is not going to be given. You can

preserve the memory as information about a boundary you don't want crossed again. But preserving information doesn't require experiencing the original pain every day.

There's a question I would never ask someone immediately after a serious wrong: «Well, what good came out of it?» It sounds almost like a demand to turn misfortune into a profit-making venture. Not every bad experience teaches us something; not every injustice makes us stronger. Sometimes the sensible goal is more modest: prevent a recurrence, restore fairness where possible, and stop paying interest on the distress for every day that passes.

THE PRICE OF JUSTICE AND THE COST OF RESENTMENT

Consider two situations. In one, you've been cheated over a purchase. You have the receipt and a way to file a complaint, and delay could affect the outcome. In the other, a stranger makes a rude remark and disappears from your life, taking their sense of humor with them. Both experiences can be called «resentment,» but the practical tasks are different. The first calls for action. In the second, the chief expense may be the time you're giving someone you'll never see again.

I wouldn't measure the strength of a feeling by the volume of your internal monologue. Of course you have a right to be angry. Sometimes anger alerts us to a violation of our boundaries. But it doesn't, by itself, tell us what to do. Better questions are: What exactly was violated? Is there evidence? Do I need to protect myself or someone close to me? What outcome would be enough? It's surprising how quickly an endless argument can end when it acquires a concrete goal. At last, it turns from a performance into a task.

Sometimes there is no available remedy. You cannot compel a boss from twenty years ago to say the right words, or transform a former classmate into a considerate human being overnight. This is the difficult part: giving up not on justice as a value, but on the demand that the past retroactively comply with your conditions. It doesn't excuse anyone's behavior. The past is simply remarkably unresponsive to follow-up instructions.

WHY RESENTMENT NEEDS AN AUDIENCE

In unpleasant stories, we sometimes acquire an invisible auditorium. In our imagination we invite friends, colleagues, future biographers, and the entire civilized world. All of them must witness how unfairly we were treated. We repeat the offending remark before this imaginary commission, adding new details to our defense. In reality, the commission never convened. But the hearings in our heads continue right on schedule.

The wish for justice may conceal a genuine need: to have the violation acknowledged. That need deserves respect. Sometimes we must demand an explanation, correct a document, recover money, or protect our reputation. At other times, what we're seeking isn't action but acknowledgment that the other person has no intention of giving. The grievance then acquires a perpetual contract: the job cannot be finished because the necessary signature belongs to somebody else.

Try naming the desired outcome without saying «so they'll understand.» An apology? Correction of a mistake? Ending contact? Changing the way work is organized? An apology depends on the other person. With some of the other possibilities, there may still be something you can do yourself. This is where memory can give way to a plan.

THE JOB WE ASSIGNED TO RESENTMENT

Sometimes resentment seems useful. As long as I remember, I won't be fooled. As long as I'm angry, I won't give in. As long as I revisit the episode, I'm defending my dignity. There's a grain of truth there: remembering violated boundaries can help us avoid repeating mistakes. But for some reason we often keep a twenty-four-hour emotional support service running alongside the useful lesson.

Take an ordinary, decidedly unheroic situation. An acquaintance interrupts you in public and belittles your work. You decide never again to discuss a project with them without an agreed agenda.

That decision fits on a single line. The memory offers an alternative format: a twenty-six-episode series in which the acquaintance says the same thing and you finally deliver the perfect reply. The decision has been made; the show goes on. There's no audience, but somehow you're paying for all the scenery.

It helps to distinguish three things. Fact: what happened? Lesson: what rule will I follow next time? Feeling: what do I still feel about it? The first two can often be put into words. The third doesn't have to disappear on command. But once the rule is established, there's no need to pass off endless mental replay as essential preparation for life.

And please don't turn this into an instruction to «forgive everyone.» Forgiveness is a separate, complicated personal matter. You may keep your distance, demand compensation, decline to renew a relationship, and gradually stop giving the offender the best hours of your day. Ending the daily trial in your head is not the same as issuing an acquittal.

RESENTMENT DOESN'T HAVE TO END IN REVENGE OR SILENCE

People often expect one of two heroic responses to an insult: immediately «put the person in their place» or forgive them once and for all. Almost the whole of human life fits between those two options. You may not want revenge and still regard the behavior as unacceptable. You may stop replaying the conversation and still refuse to let that person back into your life. You may calmly demand your money back. An emotion isn't a certificate of righteousness, but its absence doesn't cancel your rights either.

Sometimes we cling to anger because we fear that letting it go means declaring what happened acceptable. But memory isn't a notary public who annuls an event if you stop rereading it every evening. What happened still happened. For protection, preserving evidence and a clear position is more useful than maintaining a round-the-clock session of the prosecution committee inside your head.

This distinction doesn't erase pain, but it frees us from the false choice between revenge and doing nothing. We can act according to what's necessary rather than according to the temperature of our outrage. And forgetting stops being a prerequisite for living peacefully.

CHAPTER 3. I SHOULD HAVE SAID SOMETHING ELSE

The perfect comeback, as everyone knows, arrives after the conversation has ended. Sometimes half an hour later. Sometimes while you're brushing your teeth. Occasionally a particularly gifted reply turns up seven years afterward and immediately demands recognition as a work of literary genius.

During a real conversation you're limited by circumstances. You must listen, think, consider consequences, and deal with nerves. In the replay, every advantage is yours. The other person waits silently while you prepare your reply, the facts arrange themselves neatly, and your wit has no limits. Victory is complete. Unfortunately, there are no judges to award the points.

Why are we so drawn to versions of events that never happened? Because regret often grows out of a useful ability: imagining alternatives. «If I'd done that differently, things might have turned out better.» Without this capacity, we'd learn very little from our mistakes. Trouble begins when a helpful comparison becomes endless punishment for the past's refusal to follow a revised script.

Here's my simple test. If reflection ends in a change of behavior, it may have done its job. You've decided that next time you'll prepare your documents, take a pause, or state your boundaries clearly. If your tenth mental replay produces precisely the same conclusion as your first, we may no longer be learning. We may be serving a sentence.

Be careful not to deliver yourself a second helping of injustice. At the time, you knew less, you felt differently, and you couldn't read the script for all the events yet to come. Judging your past self armed with today's information is wonderfully convenient. Especially when the judge knows everything and the defendant isn't allowed to speak.

This is no excuse for irresponsibility. If you genuinely hurt someone, an apology, restitution, or an effort to put things right may be called for. But regret should point toward a possible action, not demand a lifetime of internal fines.

Then there's embarrassment over an awkward moment almost everyone else has long since forgotten. Someone made a bad joke, got a name wrong, failed to understand a question. The commentator inside immediately announces: «Everyone saw it. Everyone remembers. Your reputation is finished.» Meanwhile, the people around us are busy with their own mistakes. They lead full lives; not every episode in yours gets a private suite in theirs.

We shouldn't reassure ourselves with the invented certainty that nobody noticed. We don't know that. But we also don't know the opposite — that every witness is still contemplating our error. A little humility about what other people think is good for peace of mind.

When you're tempted to rewrite yesterday's conversation yet again, separate the lesson from the screenplay. In one sentence, say what you learned. If action is needed, identify it. If not, accept that there won't be a reshoot. Sometimes the hardest thing is agreeing to live in a world where not every exchange ends with a dazzling response.

There is, however, one decent answer almost always available: «Next time I'll do it differently.» Then you actually have to do it differently. Otherwise it's merely another season of the same old show.

My snow principle can be misunderstood in at least two ways. The first is to assume that every return to the past is harmful. That would make someone afraid even of useful recollection: remember your mistake and you're supposedly treading the same path again. But thinking through a mistake once and punishing yourself over it forever are very different activities. We don't declare all revision useless just because someone can't tear themselves away from a single textbook paragraph.

The second mistake is treating the path as a literal description of neural connections. Popular lectures sometimes display a picture of the brain and confidently explain, «Every time you remember, the pathway gets wider.» Put that baldly, the claim goes too far. Retrieval can help consolidate learning, but much depends on content, context, emotion, and the way repetition happens. I

deliberately call the snow image a metaphor. It isn't intended to illustrate the anatomy of the hippocampus. It's there to help us see our own behavior from the outside.

A third problem becomes apparent almost immediately: we can't hold memory responsible for everything that happens afterward. Someone treated you badly. That's a fact. You don't have to declare yourself guilty simply because you returned to the hurt several times. The other person's words may have been cruel; the circumstances may have been unjust. We're talking about the portion of our later life that we can sometimes influence — without excusing what happened.

I'd like you to keep that distinction with you throughout the book. Whoever acted is responsible for the act. We aren't always responsible for its consequences. But we can sometimes learn to take responsibility for certain habits that grow around an event — without self-blame or a pledge to become made of iron. Iron people are great in the movies. In everyday life, I imagine airport metal detectors would make things rather difficult for them.

Why do some remarks glance off us while others linger for years? Sometimes it depends on how much we believe them. An accusation that strikes you as absurd may cause a moment's irritation. A sentence that lands on a doubt you already have can stick much longer. «You're terrible at public speaking» is particularly painful for someone who goes onstage convinced that today will be the day they humiliate themselves.

But it's not a universal rule. An unfair accusation can hurt even a confident person. Relationships, public exposure, consequences, and established ways of communicating all matter. Pop psychology is a little too fond of reducing someone else's cruelty to a single «inner problem» in the person who was hurt. It's so convenient that it should make us suspicious. Sometimes people suffer not because they «don't love themselves,» but because somebody really did treat them badly.

Another useful boundary lies between memory and the supposed duty to forgive. I won't demand that readers forgive everyone who has wronged them. Forgiveness cannot be a standard imposed by the author of a book. You may stop revisiting an injury every day and still choose not to renew a relationship. You may acknowledge what happened and keep your distance. You may forgive and still maintain boundaries. These aren't contradictions; they're different decisions.

If the situation is continuing today — for example, you're regularly humiliated at work — «forget about it» is simply the wrong advice. This isn't a problem with memory; it's a problem with what is happening now. You may need records, a conversation, support, legal advice, or a change of environment. What you can leave behind is unnecessary mental theater around an event that has truly ended — not a problem that keeps happening. Knowing the difference may matter more than any technique.

Regret has another trick: it creates the illusion that the past was fully controllable. We see the ending and identify one supposedly obvious route to a better outcome. «I should have called sooner.» «I should have kept quiet.» «I should have agreed.» But at the time we weren't choosing between a known bad result and a known good one. We were choosing among uncertain possibilities. Sometimes the imagined alternative seems perfect only because reality never had a chance to test it.

Professional life is especially rich in examples. After a project fails, everyone suddenly knows which choice was the only sensible one. Before it failed, those same people proposed five incompatible strategies. In hindsight, collective wisdom becomes insufferably precise.

Try a short written exercise — not a daily ritual, just one review. Draw two lines on a page: «What did I know then?» and «What do I know now?» Don't smuggle today's discoveries into the first, or accuse your former self of stupidity that wasn't there. Add a third: «What will I change next time?» If it yields a clear action, the review is finished. You needn't spend three more evenings proving you've suffered enough to earn the right to learn.

Some situations cannot be repaired with a conversation or a new plan. Loss, an irreversible mistake, someone else's decision. Our task then isn't to «defeat» the past but to find a way to live within the limits of human control. That can take time and support. Adulthood doesn't mean having

an instant psychological answer to everything. Sometimes it means ceasing to fine yourself for being unable to alter yesterday.

THE LATE COMEBACK AND THE REAL-WORLD RESPONSE

Three kinds of mental return to a conversation are worth separating. The first is reviewing a mistake: you didn't clarify a deadline, ask a question, or insist on written confirmation. That may lead to a useful habit. The second is preparing for the next meeting. You jot down one or two lines you'll use if the situation recurs. That's work too, although it needn't become a dress rehearsal lasting six months. The third is a conversation that can never take place: an imaginary partner, imaginary spectators, an imaginary triumph. That last variety can swallow hours without changing anything outside your head.

I use a simple test: can you describe what came out of the reflection with a completed action? Clarified. Wrote down. Agreed. Apologized. Filed a complaint. If the only outcome is «went through it all again,» perhaps you've left the territory of problem-solving and joined a creative-retelling club. Membership is free. The club does, however, charge in sleep and good mood.

Sometimes an exchange won't leave you alone because you genuinely violated your own principles. In that case, the question isn't how to forget quickly, but whether you can put things right. An apology, an honest discussion, or compensation isn't a psychological trick; it's a human act. Not every mistake can be repaired. But where repair is possible, doing nothing in the name of «working on your memory» is a dubious achievement.

Regret makes us view yesterday through the knowledge we possess today. Now we know how it ended. Now we see exactly when to stop speaking, whom to call, which contract not to sign. But the earlier version of us didn't have that information. Demanding today's foresight of that earlier self is a bit like scolding yesterday's weather forecast for failing to take account of the report due out the day after tomorrow.

Try conducting one brief trial without a prosecutor. Write down what was known at the time; what options actually existed; what you couldn't have predicted; what you can do now. The last line is the important one. If there's no answer, perhaps the issue is no longer finding a solution but reclaiming power over a past you cannot control. Sadly, even the longest internal court sessions have no authority to repeal yesterday.

And don't confuse regret with responsibility. If your actions harmed somebody, an apology or an attempt to repair the consequences may still be necessary regardless of whether you feel better. If you merely failed to deliver a clever retort, humanity will probably get through it without a formal investigation.

WHEN THE OTHER PERSON WILL NEVER GIVE YOU AN ANSWER

Sometimes we replay a conversation not because we need a witty line. We need the other person finally to admit, «Yes, I behaved badly. Yes, you had every right to be hurt.» Ideally, we'd have this acknowledgment in writing, signed and stamped. But even a perfectly worded request can't guarantee a meaningful answer. People may not be ready to talk; they may disagree with our version of events; or they may simply refuse to revisit the past.

Two questions help here. «Can I try to clear things up?» Sometimes yes. «Can I secure precisely the response I consider fair?» Often no. If you need to recover a debt, protect a right, or correct an agreement, concrete steps may be available. If you need to force somebody to feel remorse, your range of tools is rather limited. Other people's consciences, unfortunately, don't come as standard equipment in our households.

Failing to obtain acknowledgment doesn't mean admitting you were wrong. Nor does it mean you must forgive, reconcile, or renew the relationship. You can keep your judgment of the behavior and stop searching each evening for an imaginary new line. Sometimes the only way to close a conversation is not with the other person's final word, but with your decision to stop holding hearings with them in your head.

PART II. DOES MEMORY HAVE A DELETE BUTTON?

CHAPTER 4. THE BRAIN ISN'T A RECYCLE BIN

When somebody says, «I want to delete this memory,» it's almost impossible not to picture a computer. Open a folder, select the unwanted file, press a key. Done. Empty the trash for good measure.

It's a wonderfully convenient model. And completely unsuitable for human memory.

A memory of an event isn't a single object stored in one drawer. It may involve images, words, sensations, knowledge of the circumstances, and emotions. When we remember, the brain doesn't simply play a finished video; it reconstructs an event from surviving traces and cues. The same day may therefore feel different as the years go by. We can retain important elements of what happened without preserving everything in an unchanging form.

There's also a difference between something you can't recall right now and something irretrievably lost. Try naming all your elementary-school teachers. Perhaps one of them simply won't come to mind. Then you see an old photograph and suddenly remember not only the surname but the person's way of speaking. Nothing mystical: the picture provided a cue that made previously inaccessible information available.

So here's the first piece of bad news for fans of the Delete key: failing to recall something now doesn't mean it will never return. Conversely, a detail that suddenly resurfaces isn't necessarily accurate just because it feels vivid and certain.

The second piece of news is more promising. The accessibility of memories can change. Attention, context, retrieval frequency, competing information, and control processes all affect it. Research on active forgetting suggests that under certain conditions the brain can interfere with the retrieval of unwanted information. But reducing the likelihood of remembering material in an experiment is not remotely the same as guaranteeing the deletion of a painful event from someone's life.

This leaves me, as a memory instructor, in a peculiar position. In class we train access to information we want: we create cues and associations, practice retrieval, and recall without prompts. With unwanted memories, the task appears to be the reverse. But simply applying the opposite instructions won't do. Emotional events are more complicated than word lists, and psychological difficulties aren't solved with one neat trick.

Picture a house where you know the route to every room. One corridor has become unpleasant. You can use it less often, rearrange the furniture, learn another way to get where you're going. But announcing that the room no longer exists is probably not wise — particularly if it contains documents you might need one day.

The past has no will of its own. It doesn't knock at the door demanding a weekly report. But cues in the present can unexpectedly bring it to life. Learning to live sensibly with memory doesn't always require demolishing corridors. Sometimes it's enough to stop moving into them.

Scientists distinguish several situations that ordinary speech lumps together as «forgetting.» A memory may have been weakly formed in the first place. It may still exist, but the right cue is missing. Similar information may interfere with retrieval. Or the emotional importance of an event may have changed. To the observer who expected an answer and found a blank space, these situations look alike. The mechanisms may be entirely different.

I like the everyday analogy of a library, though you can take it too far. If the reading room can't find a book, that doesn't mean it was burned. Perhaps somebody entered the wrong call number, forgot the floor, or mixed up the title. A psychologist cannot rummage through another person's memory

like a librarian checking a shelf and certify that a recollection has been permanently destroyed. Researchers therefore tend to measure accessibility under specified conditions, not absolute proof that no trace remains.

And memory isn't an independent saboteur. It helps us avoid repeating mistakes. If an unpleasant event contains a genuine warning, trying to forget it at any cost may cost us useful experience. I'd prefer another outcome: keep the knowledge, reduce the needless emotional replay. The information stays on the payroll without taking over management.

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