

LEARNING TO LET GO

Loss is at best disheartening but over-focussing on our losses adds salt to our wounds. When grieving you might sorely miss the person who is no longer there but does that mean that you should isolate yourself from those who remain? You won't be able to replace the person who is gone but at least you remain engaged with people who can help you cope. The "if only" thinking, as in "if only I did not have that experience, I would be so much better off" has a price.

If only" thinking often results in an assumption that might be used as an explanation for our inability to take necessary action. The "if only" belief is an assumption that two events are somehow tied together or that one event depends on another. This is relevant to depression as many depressed persons believe that their depression is an unescapable product of their life experiences. For instance, a victim of an assault might believe that they would be significantly happier if they were never assaulted (true) and that consequently having been assaulted precludes their chances at happiness (false). A piano prodigy might believe that music defines them (true) and that is impossible to find meaning in life other than through being a concert pianist (false) and consequently finds it hard to recover psychologically from an accident that damaged his hands.

Try to identify your assumptions related to your past by completing the sentences below.

If only I did not have that accident
this did not happen, today I would be I would be still doing sports
feeling and doing this.

If only I was not abused
this did not happen, today I would be I would be happy
feeling and doing this.

If only _____,
this did not happen, today I would be _____
feeling and doing this.

If only _____,
this did not happen, today I would be _____
feeling and doing this.

If only _____,
this did not happen, today I would be _____
feeling and doing this.

If only _____,
this did not happen, today I would be _____
feeling and doing this.

Circle the "if only" statement that you tend to use the most often when you feel stuck and unable to manage.

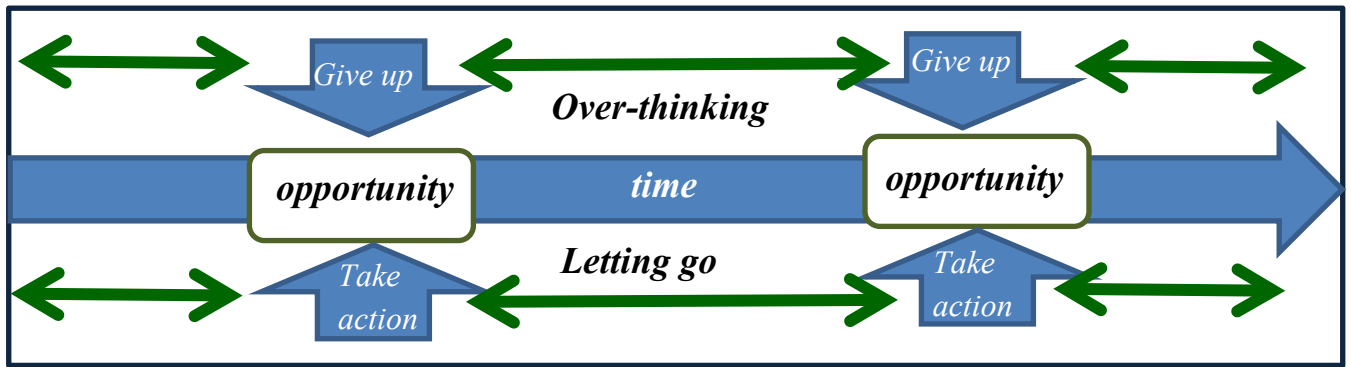
The “if only” statements often imply that our happiness or success are **solely and fully** dependent on absence of adverse or traumatic events in our lives. Granted, life is better without such bad luck but current wellbeing depends on what is happening in our lives right now. Let’s define “happiness” as a combination of relationships we have, goods/status, what we are able to do on everyday basis if we are in such states and what need to do on daily basis to preserve the success and happiness that you want.

HAPPINESS: What does it mean to you?		
What relationships would you have and how these relationships would be like if you were happy?	What would you be doing with your time if you were happy?	What would you have to do on daily basis in order to preserve your happiness?
Is any of that available or possible right now?	Is any of that available or possible right now?	Are you doing any of this in order to gain your happiness?

Remember, it’s not about giving-up/giving in and punishing yourself for not being able to “pull yourself by your boot straps”. The idea is to recognize the mental processes that make our lives worse when we are trying our best to make our lives better. It’s all about a distinction between giving up (and accepting bad fate) and letting go (of reminiscing about bad events while taking action steps to change our live circumstances.)

GIVING UP / GIVING IN VS. LETTING GO	
Characteristics and examples of “giving up / giving in”: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • OVERGENERALIZING (“Nothing will work, “Life is hopeless”, “I am a loser”) • OVERFOCUS ON “IF ONLY” (“If only I could keep that job, today things would be so much better”, “If only my partner did not leave me, my life would have been stable”) • FOCUS ON “IMAGINARY JUSTICE” AT THE EXPENSE OF LIVING IN HERE AND NOW (“I hope that they get their just deserts.”) 	Characteristics and examples of “letting go”: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FOCUS ON GOALS (“I would like to be happy, I enjoy travel so let me see if I can save enough cash to go an see”) • LEARNING AND SELF-CORRECTION (“I could have done this to prevent that person from taking advantage of me. In the future I won’t co-sign loans.”) • REPAIR (“I miss being in a relationship and don’t like feeling lonely, how about I spend some time with...”, “I lost money in this business, to recuperate I need to come up with... and that means that I should”) • SELF-AWARENESS (“This was painful and I hate that it happened. I have been thinking about it again. What do I hope to accomplish by thinking about it? What am I missing because of my preoccupation?”)

Giving up and letting go can also be understood in terms of timing. People who give up do not take advantage of life opportunities and might still end up by overthinking. People who let go, take advantage of opportunities when such opportunities present themselves while at the same time they are able to disengage from over-thinking.



REDUCING FOCUS ON LOSSES

A: UNDERSTANDING IMPACT OF FOCUSING ON LOSSES

1: Write the “if only” statement related to losses that you have experienced that you use the most often:

2: How did the event that you refer to impact your life?

3: What are the benefits of thinking like this?

4: What are the costs of thinking like this?

B: GETTING UNSTUCK

5: If you were not stuck in your thoughts, what would you be doing with your time?

6: What barriers are you facing presently that make it difficult for you to do what you desire?

7: What can you do about these barriers?

8: What thoughts block you from letting go?

9: How can you counter the thoughts that block you?

10: Given all of the above, what are your next steps?

In terms of things that you might do today to help your situation?

In terms of short-term goals that can be accomplished within a month?

In terms of things that you would like to see happen in your life in the long term?

C: LEARNING FROM ACTION STEPS

11: Take the first step and write down what happened:

12: Did things get worse, better or stayed the same as a result of your taking action steps? (Stick to facts)