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Career Path: Regret ... And Other Things That Compound

Skills and Professional Development

Many of you will know about the power of compound interest. Albert Einstein supposedly called it the "eighth wonder of the world" and Warren Buffet said, "My life has been a product of compound interest."

I've already referred to compounding for you in articles describing how to get rich. If you were reading carefully, then you understood that, although you can use compounding to achieve financial wealth, that will not necessarily bring you happiness.

If you want to be successful in your career, one of the most important things you can learn is that you are **largely a creation of habits**. Whether you succeed in your endeavors, feel happy with your life, and become physically and mentally healthy — all these things are driven by habits.

Or as Raj on the sitcom The Big Bang Theory puts it when asking a girlfriend for honest feedback: "… Except for anything I say, or do, or am. Those are my triggers." Replace triggers with habits, and you grasp the importance of habits.

Without our consciously realizing it, little things we do become things that we regularly do. Things we regularly do compound over time. It is not just financial decisions that compound.

If you look, you will find compounding in these areas of your life as well:

- Small decisions you make each day about how you approach your work will impact the course of your career. Do you make a conscious choice to do your level best each day, no matter what you're doing? Or do you resent doing less exciting or less important work because you know you can do more?
- Your routine daily interactions with those around you will determine the course of your relationships. Do you treat your friends and family as gifts, and cherish them? Or do you take them for granted, and sometimes vent your frustrations on them?
- Anyone who has struggled to maintain their weight knows that it is small, daily decisions about what you eat that drive your long-term health. Similarly, if you've ever gotten on an exercise kick, you will have felt first-hand the wonderful reinforcement that comes from sticking with an exercise program and seeing the impact on your fitness.

The power of compounding applies to our thoughts as much as it does to our actions. If you dwell on your mistakes, and wallow in regret, you will become a bitter person.

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We all know someone who cannot let go of a past relationship or a missed opportunity. Does this make them fun to be around, even to themselves? Do you want to be a sad, angry person? When you are stuck in the past, that means you are not living in the present.

Change is possible

My suggestion to you is that your nature is not immutable. Far from it. No matter what ill winds blow your way, you are more than the sum of what's happened to you. If you wish, you can become a more positive, charitable, kind, and happy person. You don't even need the iron willpower of a Stoic master to do it.

All you need is to recognize that the power of habits applies to your mind and your thoughts. You can then start to adopt habits that move you in the direction you want to go.

The only thing you truly control is what you think. Thus, the path to happiness is not built upon pavers of enjoyment, but from choices: You must decide what you want and stick with your decisions.

You might be thinking, "This all sounds great in theory. But how do I control what I think in practice? Negative thoughts come to me unbidden."

To start, try to recognize when you find yourself dwelling on negative thoughts, or being uncharitable to others. Also notice when you are being uncharitable to yourself. We are never so strict taskmasters as when we are judging our own actions.

Focus on the positive

Over time, you will become adept at catching yourself when you start to think negative thoughts. The next step is to consciously focus on something positive, no matter how trivial it seems. You can almost always find a positive in every situation.

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Treat it as a challenge to find something good in even the seemingly worst possible situation. Relatively soon, you will have trained yourself to look for the positive. A setback suddenly becomes an opportunity, a hardship, a chance to test your mettle.

This practice is doubly helpful. It will move you in the direction of becoming a happier and more self-sufficient person. It also helps prepare you for the inevitable setbacks and hardships that come our way.

Be well.

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