Clearing Out The Cobwebs Of Regret
By Lynn M. Schiller, PhD

How often have you looked back over life choices and thought you should have done it differently? The nagging feeling that had you gone in a different direction, things could have turned out better.

In 2011, Northwestern University and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign conducted research on what Americans regret. The study gathered data from 370 participants by way of phone interview. The researchers found that the most common regrets involved missed romances and family issues, and to a lesser degree education and work. The researchers concluded that the romance and family regrets are linked to a sense of belonging whereas the latter are less tied to socially based constructs.¹

When grappling with nagging feeling of regret ask yourself the following three questions:

1) Are you mostly happy with where you are in life?

If you answered yes to this question, you are in the black with regard to decision-making. Your steps and choices have brought you to a place of general positivity and regret has little place in the overall vista.

2) How sure are you that an alternate choice would have brought you to a better place in life?

In life we tend to play armchair quarterback on the past choices we have made. We are not clairvoyant. There is no possible way to determine with complete accuracy if another alternative would have yielded a better result.

3) What does thinking about and living with regret take you away from now? How could your mental energy be better used?

The time spent thinking about regrets could be preventing you from living in the moment. Staying present-minded and letting go of the past will help you stay more connected to your experiences and the people in your life. It can also help you be more effective in decision making and planning for the future.

Not all regrets are mired in the negative. At times regret can serve as a motivator to improve and move you forward. Provided your regret does not tether you to the past or occupy time with negative emotions or thought, it can be just the thing to make positive changes and move in a more fulfilling direction.

Lynn Schiller, PhD is a clinical psychologist with a private practice in Summit, NJ. Dr. Schiller works with patients as young as two and adults well into their senior years. Lynn has a background in developmental psychology and play therapy and has worked in in-patient hospitals, mental health clinics, counseling centers, and is currently seeing patients in her own practice. She has a 15-year track record of working effectively with all ages on issues related to anxiety, depression, grief, and stress management. Dr. Schiller also has experience working with the deaf and is knowledgeable in American Sign Language. Most recently, Dr. Schiller has functioned at the Public Education Coordinator for NJPA and sits as a Member-at-Large on the executive board.