

**The Mothers Who Regret Having Kids:  
I Wished I Were Holding a Cat and Not a Baby**

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While it's rare for regretful mothers to speak out openly, there's evidence that they are a real and struggling minority.

Tanya was never sure about having kids.

She told friends and family she wasn't convinced she wanted to be a mother, that she didn't feel a zest for children. In response, people assured her she'd be overcome with love for her own children, and warned that she would deeply regret missing out on motherhood.

There was *a lot of comfort, and probably unintentional gaslighting*, says the Alberta-based 37-year-old, now a mother of two children under five.

Tanya, who requested to withhold her surname for privacy reasons, decided to have a baby in part because she knew her husband wouldn't be fulfilled without experiencing fatherhood. She hoped that all those assurances would be correct, and that she would snap happily into mother mode.

But that is not what happened.

*As soon as I got pregnant I was like: Oh God, I don't want to be pregnant*, says Tanya, whose second child was unplanned. *But I kept believing: I'll have the baby and then I'll be fine.* After giving birth to her first child, she experienced postpartum depression. *I haven't reached a point where it's been fine*, she says.

Transitioning into motherhood, Tanya felt a measure of what she calls *identity erasure*: the loss of her past self and all she had prioritized and enjoyed, such as making music and teaching yoga. But the issue was more fundamental than that. She simply did not want to be a mom.

Tanya says she feels foolish for making such a permanent, life-changing decision despite her uncertainties.

Her experience, while deeply personal, is part of a larger pattern shaped by societal pressures and expectations that have long dictated women's roles: a weave of patriarchy, religion, capitalism and the gender essentialist idea that those who can bear children should do so.

Women without children have been historically mocked, pitied and stigmatized in many cultures. The notion that having children is the only way to be a *normal* adult woman has long been encoded in US culture. European settlers lived by the *biblical injunction to be fruitful and multiply* and *the need for children to labor in fields*, which led to lots of progeny, writes

Rachel Chrastil, historian and author of *How to Be Childless: A History and Philosophy of Life Without Children*.

Today, the idea persists in tradwife social media content portraying stay-at-home motherhood as idyllic and serene, and is upheld by politicians who reduce access to reproductive care or fretting, like Donald Trump's vice-presidential running mate JD Vance did in 2020, that not having *kids in your life* makes people *miserable* and *sociopathic*.

Yet, a growing number of Americans are opting out of parenthood, with the percentage of adults under 50 who say they're unlikely to have kids increasing from 37% in 2018 to 47% in 2023, according to Pew Research Center. Fifty-seven percent of respondents who were unlikely to have kids say it's because they simply don't want them.

*I find it funny in retrospect, how many people say: Oh, just because you don't like other people's kids, your own will be different. I've witnessed people that have birthed their own arch nemesis. You might birth the bane of your existence,* Tanya said.

There isn't much data on maternal or paternal regret. But there is some evidence that regretful parents constitute a real, struggling minority.

*I kept believing: I'll have the baby and then I'll be fine.* I haven't reached a point where it's been fine" – Tanya, 37

In 2023, Dr Konrad Piotrowski, a psychology professor at SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Poland, published a study on parental regret. Piotrowski chose the topic because, in spite of parenthood being *one of the most important roles adults play*, he found very little pre-existing research on the issue of regret, which he attributes to its taboo nature.

*I quite often hear from my colleagues that they don't want to believe that parents can admit in a study that they regret having children,* says Piotrowski. But when he put out a call to recruit mothers and fathers who regretted parenthood, he was *contacted by dozens of people within a few days*.

Piotrowski developed a scale for measuring regret, and applied it across two broadly representative sample groups, estimating that in developed countries, 5% to 14% of parents regret their decision to have children and would choose childlessness if they could turn back time. His report referenced one 2013 Gallup poll that asked US parents over 45 how many children they would have wanted if they could re-do their lives. Of those surveyed, 7% responded that they would choose to have no children.

While it is uncommon for regretful parents to speak out openly, they're

real. The Facebook group I Regret Having Children has 76,000 anonymous members, while Reddit's *RegretfulParents* has 140,000. On these forums, parents from varying backgrounds vent about anxiety related to their children's health and well being, the financial burdens of raising them, fatigue and lack of support, their loss of self and the way nothing they do is ever enough. Regretting motherhood doesn't make you a bad mother

Fathers can experience parental regret, but social expectations make regretting motherhood especially controversial, says Orna Donath, doctor of sociology at Tel Aviv University and Ben Gurion University of the Negev, among other institutions, and author of the 2017 book *Regretting Motherhood: A Study*.

Those who idealize motherhood might see maternal regret as tantamount to depravity. *There is a tendency to connect between regretting motherhood and abusive and neglectful behavior*, notes Donath.

*This is a rather careless assumption*, she says; being a regretful parent does not equate to being abusive, nor does it necessarily imply a lack of love for one's children.

All of the 23 regretful mothers Donath interviewed for her analysis on the subject emphasized that the target of their regret was not their children, but the role of motherhood itself. Several felt regret from the moment they became pregnant, and linked their feelings to the realization motherhood was not suited for them, rather than their children as individuals.

*I regret having had children and becoming a mother, but I love the children that I've got ... I wouldn't want them not to be here, I just don't want to be a mother*, explains Charlotte, a 44-year-old participant in Donath's study.

Effy, a 31-year-old single mother of a toddler, experienced regret not long after giving birth. *When my baby was two months old, I saw a family member holding a cat, similar to how I was holding my baby. I felt a pang of jealousy and that I had made a severe mistake. I wished I were holding a cat and not a baby*, she said.

Effy tells me she has been able to focus on being a good mother despite not finding joy in her child. *I trust that the better job I do at parenting when he's young, the better job he will do at being self-sufficient when he grows up*, she says.

A mother can also develop excellent parenting skills and beneficial personal traits despite feeling regret. *I am a better person because I'm a parent*, says Tanya. *Parenting has forced me to decenter myself. And through that, I have noticed myself become a lot more compassionate. I'm a better listener*.

*I'm more patient, I'm more empathetic. And all of this is definitely fueled by the job of parenting, because I have to at least try to do the job well.*

Because emotions are not binary or exclusive, love and regret are not necessarily paradoxical, says Donath. Conversely, she says, parents can be indifferent or hostile toward their children without regretting them.

Nonetheless, regretful mothers are often *treated as monsters*, says Donath.

This is eventually what happened to Tanya. Struggling with her feelings, she opened up to a friend.

*She called my parents and there was a whole intervention where they were like: 'Do you need to go to the hospital? Are you OK? We're scared for you.'* And I was like: *'I'm not gonna hurt anybody. I'm not gonna hurt myself,* she recalls.

As a result, Tanya now only discusses her feelings with her friends or family in anodyne terms. *They hear me if I say I'm having a hard day or I'm tired*, but it can be too much for people, she says, *to understand that you can be a great parent and you can love your children - you can actively be doing a great job at being a mother and regret it.* Finding solidarity with other regretful mothers

California-based entrepreneur and host of the podcast *Call Her Daring*, Kelley Daring, 46, reads anonymously submitted accounts of maternal regret on TikTok; she featured Tanya's in April.

Childfree by choice, Daring serves as a calm, humanizing surrogate voice and face for regretful mothers. She encourages her audience to listen and empathize, rather than assume that someone who regrets having children is simply a bad parent.

*My approach is about informing and educating, so that women can make better choices for themselves* when it comes to whether to have children and the realities of parenthood, explains Daring. She has received many messages thanking her for opening up this conversation and helping people *feel less alone in their own regret*, she says.

Effy tells me she had never heard parental regret discussed prior to finding Daring's account. Hearing other people's stories of parental and marital regret helped her gain *the confidence to know I'd be happier as a single mom*, and leave her partner. These videos made it *easier to deal with and release the feeling of shame*.

Daring also shares perspectives submitted by childfree people. Stories about being nurturing, maternal and loving to the children in our lives – by being a *cool auntie*, mentor, step-parent or friend – can defang the threat that

forgoing motherhood leads to loneliness and misery by helping people imagine a happy, connected life that does not hinge on reproduction. Navigating maternal regret

Dr Ashurina Ream, a Phoenix-based clinical psychologist specializing in perinatal mental health, frequently encounters parental regret in her practice.

Ream notes that regret is often buried beneath layers of internalized shame. Instead of addressing their regret directly, patients express feelings of inadequacy in their parenting, coupled with anxiety, depression and burnout. They struggle with the *huge discrepancy between this vision or idea of what they thought motherhood was going to be like and the reality of it*, says Ream.

*If you are holding on to feelings of regret, seeking help is really important*, says Ream, particularly with a therapist equipped to understand and address the underlying factors that may be amplifying your feelings. These could include unaddressed mental or physical health challenges, unresolved trauma or fears of repeating negative generational cycles and revisiting difficult early life experiences.

*I wouldn't want [my children] not to be here, I just don't want to be a mother* – Charlotte, 44

For even stronger negative feelings towards your child, such as hate, Ream would *highly suggest individual and family therapy to figure out what's at the root of that and how you change that so not everyone in your household is feeling miserable*. She also recommends Postpartum Support International, which has a helpline for parents and a directory of mental health providers.

*Most often parents are suffering because they are still trying their absolute best to do a really great job while also deteriorating because they're holding onto something that they haven't shared with anybody*, Ream says. She cautions against sharing feelings of regret unless you are absolutely certain the person you're sharing them with has your best interests at heart and is capable of engaging with challenging aspects of human complexity. But sharing them with a truly non-judgmental support person can be important.

She warns that reacting judgmentally to someone's confession of maternal regret is *very harmful*. Parents are coping with immense pressures in a system that does little to support their access to affordable childcare and paid work leave; heaping more guilt on them compounds shame and adds to their emotional burden. *We live in a society that does not value women, unfortunately, and does not support parents*, she says.

Loss of identity is a common experience for new mothers. Ream emphasizes that maintaining or restarting personal interests, relationships and hob-

bies can be emotionally stabilizing. Parents may reflect on the *old life* they miss, especially when their kids are young, but normalcy, comfort and independence can re-emerge at any time, and be anchoring forces that improve the dynamics of a household even if they don't totally ameliorate regret.

Tanya has been making space for other parts of her life lately and says she is feeling just a little more like herself. *I hadn't even been to a yoga class in a few years, she tells me. This week I went twice and I was like: 'Oh yeah, there she is. She's in there somewhere.*