



Mindset



Exercise



20 min



Client



No

## Seeing Through the Hindsight-Bias

It is normal and adaptive to experience disappointment and regret from time to time because these emotions provide valuable information that guides our future decision-making [1, 2]. Individuals with depression may experience exaggerated and prolonged feelings of disappointment and regret (among other negative emotions) due to impairments in their cognitive processing. According to Beck's integrative model of depression [3], depressive symptoms result from negative schemata generating negative biases in attention, memory, and thinking. One such bias is the 'hindsight bias,' defined as a cognitive illusion that makes events seem more predictable than they seemed at the time of their occurrence. Hindsight bias can lead people to believe that they knew more than they did at the time, despite evidence indicating that they did not. For example, an individual who was involved in a car accident may have been entirely unaware of the car coming from behind which caused the collision though he or she may later come to believe that they indeed saw the other car in their rearview.

Research has shown that depressed individuals judge negative but not positive outcomes as more foreseeable and more inevitable in hindsight [1]. They also misremember prior expectations as more negative than they initially were [1]. Because depressed individuals are also more prone to rumination, they are more likely to become tangled in hindsight bias in the event of a regretted personal decision or action, which perpetuates any accompanying feelings of shame and regret. This tool invites clients to look back on a past decision to understand what contributed to it and then consider what they would have done differently if they could travel back in time.



### Author

This tool was created by Dr. Lucinda Poole and Dr. Hugo Alberts.



### Goal

This tool aims to help clients unpack a past decision so that they may understand what contributed to this choice at that point in time. With this information, they then consider what they would have done differently if they could travel back in time.





## Advice

- Some clients may initially struggle to accept and make peace with their identified decision. These clients may have deep-seated shame about their past decision and may believe that they are “bad” or “defective” somehow. It would be helpful to spend some more time on each of the steps in this exercise (work at the client’s pace) to dive deeper into their thoughts and feelings about themselves and the situation. These clients may also benefit from repeating the exercise in a week or two.



## References

1. Groß, J., & Bayen, U. J. (2016). Effects of dysphoria and induced negative mood on the processes underlying hindsight bias. *Cognition & Emotion*. doi:10.1080/02699931.2016.1249461
2. Zeelenberg, M., van Dijk, W. W., & Manstead, A. S. R. (1998). Reconsidering the relation between regret and responsibility. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 74, 254-272. doi:10.1006/obhd.1998.2780
3. Beck, A. T., Rush, A. J., Shaw, B. F., & Emery, G. (1979). *Cognitive therapy of depression*. New York, NY: Guilford.





# Seeing Through the Hindsight-Bias

## Introduction

We all make decisions that we regret. With the benefit of hindsight, we can look back on our decisions to understand what led us to make that call at that point in time. This information can help us move away from past regrets rather than remain stuck in them.

## Part A: Unpacking my decision

### Step 1: Describe a personal decision

Recall a decision you have made in your life that you regret. Briefly describe this personal decision below:

### Step 2: Consider why you made this decision

Take a moment to think about why you made this decision at that time. In the space below, write down as many possible reasons as you can think of:

■

■

■

■

■

■





### Step 3: Consider what you knew

Consider what you knew to be true (the facts) when you made this decision. List as many facts as you can think of below:

- 
- 
- 
- 
- 
- 

### Step 4: Consider your knowledge of the outcome

Reflecting on your fortune-telling abilities now, could you have known the outcome when you made this decision? Circle:

Yes / No

### Step 5: Consider your knowledge of the long-term effects

Did you know that you would feel this way later when you made this decision? Circle:

Yes / No





### Step 6: Rate your decision

Considering what you have unpacked in the previous five steps, how understandable was the decision that you made at that point in time (on a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 = not at all understandable and 10 = completely understandable)?

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Not at all understandable					Completely understandable					

### Part B: Learning from hindsight

With the benefit of hindsight, we can look at our past decisions and think about what we would have done differently if we could go back in time.

### Step 7: Reflecting on your decision

Since reflecting on your decision in Part A, would you make the same decision today if you found yourself in the same situation? Please discuss your answer in the space below.

### Step 8: Using hindsight for future decision-making

If you answered “yes” to the previous question, you might end the exercise here as you are at peace with the decision you made at the time.





If you answered “no” to the previous question, consider what you would have done differently at that point in time. With the benefit of hindsight, what decision would you have made instead and why?

### Step 9: Accepting your decision

We cannot always get things right. Mistakes and bad decisions are an inevitable part of life. As discussed so far in this exercise, we can use hindsight to learn from the past and make better decisions in the future.

Accepting a wrong decision or bad call can indeed take time. To start this process, please come up with a caring statement to yourself that shows a level of kindness and understanding for making the decision that you made at that precise point in time. You may consider something along the lines of “At that point in time, it was the best decision that I could make.”

Write down your caring statement to yourself below:

### Step 10: Reminding yourself

Finally, think of what you can do to remind you of the insights you gained from this exercise in the future. Write a personal take-home message that will serve as a reminder the next time you find yourself making a decision you regret below: