

# HOW NOT TO DWELL ON THE PAST

Life skills

→ Learn from mistakes, but know how to let them go and move on

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Reflecting on the past is essential for helping us learn from our experiences, and coming to terms with what's happened to us. But when you spend too much time mentally rehashing past events, it becomes rumination – one of the most destructive habits for our mental wellbeing. 'When we ruminate, we start to make up stories,' says psychotherapist Rachel Shattock Dawson (therapyonthames.co.uk). 'So, instead of simply reflecting on why a relationship didn't work out, we think, "This always happens to me", then start to predict the future, "I will never meet anyone". Rumination is thinking with a negative filter – it ignores things that have gone well, or happy events, so rather than being insightful or helpful, it leaves us feeling more confused or hopeless.'

Dwelling on the past also undermines our health and happiness, because the 'mental churn' of rumination triggers a physiological response in the body, raising levels of stress hormones. And according to a study of nearly 33,000 people from 172 countries by the University of Liverpool and BBC Life Labs, it's not adverse life events that put

you at risk of anxiety and depression, but whether or not you spend time stewing over them.

Human minds are very good at 'time travel,' says Dr Fiona Kennedy, consultant clinical psychologist and co-author of *Get Your Life Back* (Robinson, £12.99). 'This time travelling can be a source of great pleasure or great anguish in our lives, and has been found to underlie many mental health problems. Ruminating about the past can produce flight or fight changes in our bodies. Our brains monitor these changes and take them as a sign that we're in danger.'

'Typical ruminating thoughts are, "If only (I had chosen differently/done something else/said something etc)", or "I wish (I had done X/given my kids more time/ worked harder in school etc)", or "That was a bad thing she or he did". There may also be images in our minds of the events or situations we remember,' says Dr Kennedy.

Women are more likely to ruminate than men, and it may be one reason why they also have twice ►

“ MENTAL TIME TRAVEL CAN CAUSE GREAT PLEASURE, OR GREAT ANGUISH ”

the risk of depression. 'People with perfectionist tendencies who like to get everything right are typical ruminators,' says Shattock Dawson. 'A typical theme is misunderstandings and problems in relationships. We also tend to ruminate on events that created strong emotions like guilt, shame or embarrassment.' Like picking at a scab, rumination can become compulsive, but it is possible to kick a rumination habit, and train your thinking to support, rather than undermine, you.

## How to stop rehashing the past

**GROUND YOURSELF** 'We can spend so much time thinking about the past that we do not have room to see or feel what is around us now. Grounding makes our minds concentrate and really experience where we are now,' says Dr Kennedy. 'It is about focusing on sensations right now, even when we are bombarded with rumination and worry.' An easy way to do this is to carry something with you like a stone that you can touch and focus on. 'Ask yourself, is it smooth, cold, etc,' says Dr Kennedy. 'Or some people find it helpful to put a loose-fitting elastic band on their wrist and flick it when they need to come back to the present moment.'

**DETACH FROM YOUR THOUGHTS** Using 'detached mindfulness' – seeing your thoughts as just thoughts, rather than a reflection of reality – not only reduces the symptoms of anxiety and depression, it stops them coming back, according to a new study from Norway. One way to do this is to think, 'I am having the thought that [whatever you are ruminating about]. It's a reality check that these are thoughts, not facts.'

**SCHEDULE 'WORRY TIME'** Set aside 30 minutes in the evening where you think about the past. 'It's a way of putting yourself back in control of your rumination, instead of it controlling you,' says Shattock Dawson. 'If thoughts about the past come up during the day, tell yourself you'll think about that at "worry time" – make a note of them if it helps – then try to distract yourself by going for a short walk, doing some exercise, reading a book or phoning a friend.' Then when "worry time" comes, set a timer and only allow yourself to think for 30 minutes. Notice the difference the thinking creates in your mood. When the time is up, get up and distract yourself. 'As time goes on, you may find that when worry time comes, you don't want to spend it ruminating,' says Shattock Dawson.

“ TRY TO BE MORE ACCEPTING AND FORGIVING OF YOUR PAST MISTAKES ”

**FILL A 'WORRY BUCKET'** If ruminating is stopping you sleeping, imagine a bucket being lowered from the ceiling, says Shattock Dawson. 'Visualise putting each of the things that you are ruminating about into the bucket, then imagine pulling it up to the ceiling. You can tell yourself that you can have your worries back later, once you've had some sleep.'

**CULTIVATE SELF-COMPASSION** So many of us think it's a good thing to be hard on ourselves, and not 'let ourselves off the hook' about past mistakes. But how can you ever feel good about yourself when you have a mental tape of 'My Top 10 Failures' running on repeat? It's easy to be wise in hindsight, but you made the choices you did because of what was going on at the time. And studies show that being more accepting and forgiving of our past mistakes makes us more motivated to make positive changes. Try taking a piece of paper and writing down what comes to mind when you ask yourself this question: 'How could my life be better if I let go of thinking of myself in this way?'

**USE A MANTRA** Create a positive affirmation that you can repeat when you catch yourself going into rumination mode, such as, 'I choose to let this go and in doing so I set myself free.' **i**

