Ruminating on Our Not so Finest Moments

Why does our mind so easily twist and turn happy thoughts into moments of anxiety-filled rumination?

For those of us who tend to be over thinkers, that free time we were looking forward to in retirement isn't always a good thing. Free time brings many moments of happy reflection which can so easily twist and turn their way into moments of anxiety-filled rumination. And suddenly there we are—bobbing up and down in the dank swamp water of that one regrettable memory from the recent past or an eon ago.

Whether it was a time when we acted out of immaturity, insensitivity, spontaneity, ignorance, or even sheer stupidity, we are trapped in its muck and mire and we can't swim away. The memory plays over and over, trapped in our head, whirling and somersaulting in the cesspool of our brains. (I've learned from countless Google searches that some refer to this area of the brain as the hippocampus, but cesspool seems more concise.)

Did you Know There's a Actually a Ruminating Gene?

Although I can't seem to Google my way to the actual study, the Wall Street Journal confirms that Yale University has determined the tendency to ruminate might be encrypted in our DNA.

"Researchers at Yale have identified a gene mutation for ‘rumination’ — the kind of chronic worry in which people obsess over negative thoughts. It’s a variation of a gene known as BDNF that’s active in the hippocampus, an area of the brain involved in thinking and memory," journalist Melinda Beck reports.

And thinking back on incidents I remember as a child, I know my father and both my maternal and paternal grandmothers were chronic ruminators. Their worries often spilled out in bits of conversations they had with other family members. As a skilled eavesdropper, I empathized with their worries. In particular, I remember my grandmother disclosing that she made my grandfather return home the first night of a road trip because their hotel was across from a cemetery. She was worried it was an omen.

Although I long believed that I learned my great talent for ruminating from these three great masters, I now understand that maybe this trait was beyond their control. Maybe, it was passed down to them as it was me, little unwelcome particles of DNA thumbing a ride in our chromosomes.

Worrier Vs Warrier, Us Vs Them

Another perspective I find insightful is that of Maureen Schwehr, Naturopathic Medical Doctor (NMD) at Sierra Tuscon. She provides information about a "worrier gene" that codes for the catechol-O-methyl transferase or COMP enzyme. She claims this...
gene has two variants. The **worrier gene** breaks down the catecholamines at a slower pace and the **warrior gene** breaks down the neurotransmitters at a quicker pace.

Those with the worrier gene are the ruminators who are more easily “overwhelmed.” In contrast, those with the warrior variant handle stress far more effectively. “Warriors are able to let go of stressful events faster,” Schwehr writes.

And this puts the relationship between me and my husband in a nutshell, God bless him, he is a warrior and I am a worrier.

During our forty years together, I’ve wasted far too much time ruminating and he has wasted far too much time chiding me for it. In those forty years, I have never known him to worry about anything. I envy the way he can mentally resolve an issue and put it out of his mind while I agonize during the day and toss and turn at night. In the early days of our marriage, my worry about work, kids, interactions with others, or better choices that should have been made were often met with his, “Who the hell cares?” and “Don’t wallow in it!”

As we’ve grown older, he’s developed more empathy for my brooding, but when my thoughts trigger anxiety that I try to discuss with him, he becomes impatient when his offer of a ready solution doesn’t satisfy me. I want to analyze an issue from every angle. I want him to reassure me each step of the way. This annoys him and his annoyance annoys me—and triggers even more ruminating.

**Twice as Many Women as Men are Ruminators**

Apparently I’m not alone. The late Yale University professor Susan Nolen-Hoeksema concluded that women are twice as likely as men to be distracted and distressed by rumination, primarily because women place a high priority on their relationships with others. In her book titled *Women Who Think Too Much: How to Break Free of Overthinking and Reclaim Your Life*, Nolen-Hoeksema notes that ruminating has a toxic effect on our mental well being. “Your mind goes round and round over negative events in the past, problems in the present or bad things you’re worried will happen in the future,” she states. In turn, she explains, this non-productive process of thinking “interferes with our ability and motivation to solve problems.”

University of Kansas associate professor of clinical psychology Steve Ilardi also claims ruminating is harmful to our mental health. He explains this mode of thinking pushes the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis into overdrive and when this stress response mechanism is overstimulated, our brain drowns in the stress hormone cortisol. “There’s considerable evidence that a core neurological driver of clinical depression is the brain’s runaway stress response – it just won’t shut down,” Ilardi explains (qtd. in Colino).

As retirees, it’s only logical that when we have been engaged for years in jobs that occupy our thoughts for 40 or 50 hours each week, something must fill the void when we leave those jobs. And, hence, with our new free time, our minds drift aimlessly as we move through the day. We’re usually fine when we can focus our attention on a book, a crossword puzzle, an outing with friends, or volunteer work. But too often and more than ever before, some small random thing triggers a whopper of a memory—a song, a Facebook post, a TV show plot, comments from self-righteous people—and instantly we’re writhing in a hot mess of uninvited thoughts—no matter how illogical, no matter how nonsensical.

I never anticipated the prevalence of these moments nor their power. These are moments that at times seem so disturbing, I can’t share them here at the risk of giving them eternal life in the digital world. And so they remain trapped in my head, whirling around like random balls in the Powerball lottery.

One of many memories on “autoplay” occurred in a restaurant in front of nearly thirty students and colleagues when I displayed the worst example of ugly American behavior. We had pre-ordered our meals two weeks earlier and some students couldn’t recall what they had ordered. Somehow we ended up with five too many plates of steak and kidney pie, too few plates of roast beef, and the frustrated head waiter made some sharp comments about the disorganization of the whole affair. Trust me—I have handled countless situations like this with calm and kindness, but ten long travel days and aching feet got the best of me and I screeched at the top of my lungs, “Who ordered the steak and kidney pies!”—and there was more to my tirade, but I can’t remember all of my exact words.
The loud and happy chatter to that point stopped cold. Some students gaped at me in disbelief, stunned, their forks in mid-air. One very sensitive student burst into tears and left the room. My outburst was completely uncalled for. I was supposed to be the role model for good leadership, and I behaved like an abhorrent wretch. If only I had handled the situation differently.

If only!—If only!—There go those spinning balls again.

This is only one of other moments—darker, more embarrassing, more regrettable—that leave for a week or two so that others can take their place, only to return—just like an annoying and pointless media byte, analyzed from every angle, over and over and over, ad nauseum on all of my favorite news channels until a new one takes its place. Or worse, that bitter taste of vomit that wells up at the base of the throat and lingers for hours after a round of the flu.

Not too long ago, we were finishing a meal at a restaurant with our children and their families and our infant grandson Henry chose the moment to necessitate a diaper change. I remember my son with a wrinkled nose, holding little Henry at arm's distance; Henry's brows were furrowed and his perfect pink lips were pursed in an "O."

This isn't Henry's finest moment," my son exclaimed, as he handed Henry over to our daughter-in-law.

I am not sure why, but I have thought of that moment many times lately—hence the title of this reflection. If only my "not so finest" moments amounted to nothing more than a soiled diaper or two.

I often find comfort ransacking the Internet for articles that appear to be backed with research including a study conducted by Paula T. Hertel and Faith Brazovich representing Trinity and Temple Universities. In this study, researchers concluded through simulated experiments that when individuals who struggle with anxiety—as I do—were presented with potentially angst-ridden scenarios and asked to provide resolutions, they tended to add their own negative details when they were asked to recall the situation. It's a fascinating study worth reading. It suggests that when we recall an unwelcome memory, we tend to interject adverse details that actually distort reality. It's possible that we have magnified the event with a 100x lens, while those who were there might recall it much differently, more objectively, and consequently may not even remember it at all.

Whether our worries are real or distorted, they persist. In many instances, their presence casts a black cloud over us, and in turn, those who share their lives with us. Finally, after years of my husband's urging, that frequent black cloud led me to several therapy sessions and an insightful discovery. With the help of a trusted counselor—a female boomer like me, I realized the root of much of my agonizing is my tendency for perfectionism. Although, I find it easy to accept and love others unconditionally, I find it difficult to accept anything short of perfection in myself. I can't seem to forgive myself for any misstep I've taken—no matter how far in the distant past or how insignificant it might seem to others.

In fact, there is mounting evidence that a direct correlation exists between the strive for perfection and the prevalence of anxiety. In their study of the relationship between perfectionism and depression and anxiety, California Southern University researchers David S. Lessin and Nadira T. Pardo conclude "the rigid and overbearing nature of perfectionism makes it a particularly difficult problem to address." And furthermore, "besides the longstanding patterns of self-critical thinking, fear, inferiority, shame, anxiety and depressive symptoms, perfectionists have been known to reject help from mental health professionals because it implies that they are flawed." And, family counselor and author Thomas Greenspon explains, "the intense anxiety about mistakes is what separates perfectionistic people from those who simply pursue excellence. We're all disappointed when we make a mistake or don't make our goal; perfectionistic people may, in contrast, be devastated by this."

Of course, the source of my perfectionism, cultivated in childhood, is the subject of another article and isn't as relevant here. My purpose for posting these thoughts for public scrutiny is to contribute yet one more article for others like me to discover as they search the web for answers to this perplexing problem.

As a result of my research, I have found a growing body of evidence
that suggests mindful meditation is an effective way to combat anxiety, regardless of its source. A recent clinical trial led by Georgetown University Medical School Associate Professor Elizabeth A. Hoge, has found that “anxiety disorder patients had sharply reduced stress-hormone and inflammatory responses to a stressful situation after taking a mindfulness meditation course — whereas patients who took a non-meditation stress management course had worsened responses.” And while it stresses not all researchers agree that the positive results are conclusive, even the Mayo Clinic website confirms meditation has its benefits: “Meditation can help carry you more calmly through your day and may help you manage symptoms of certain medical conditions.”

My own form of mindful meditation, my Christian faith, has rescued me time and again from the darkest moments of despair. In particular, I have found one of the most comforting passages comes from the Apostle Paul to the Philippians, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4: 6 – 7).

As I grow older, I've found the best days free from worry begin with a devotion like those in Sarah Young's Jesus Calling, and quiet, focused prayer. I pray with thanksgiving, I pray for others, and I pray for wisdom and peace. It's solely through this ritual that I seem to find that sense of peace that Paul describes. It's this peace alone that guards my mind from my not so finest moments and guides me through my day.

References


“Mindfulness meditation training lowers biomarkers of stress response in anxiety disorder: Hormonal, inflammatory reactions to stress were reduced after meditation training, in rigorous NIH-sponsored trial.” Science Daily, 24 January 2017, retrieved from https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2017/01/170124111354.htm


Maybe not your finest moment but twas a fine moment indead. This is why we watch our steps and check our timing before tossing a nade. The present moment is put forward as a solution to many of life's problems; whether to heal our emotional wounds, unleash our creative minds, improve our interpersonal relationships, or release our tension and stress. Often, though, the "how to" bit is omitted. You're just told to be present, end of. It's easy, right, so no further instruction is necessary. Well... no. If it were that easy, we would all be doing it. We wouldn't need to be told to do it. Cheb Mami's opening set was in some ways a mirror image of Sting's. Where Sting's voice is like a camel's-hair brush, Cheb Mami's tenor has a fine point. And while Sting annexes non-Western styles, Cheb Mami has grafted rai's impassioned quavers and slides and its sputtering triple-time hand drumming to Western pop. His songs used reggae, rock, and in one, a surprisingly compatible Celtic reel; his improvisations pleaded and soared, confidently taking chances with every phrase.

How the Pessimism-Rumination Chain Leads to Depression. When you ruminate and you have a pessimistic explanatory style, you spiral down. Depression and anxiety can come from ruminating on the past and thinking that it'll happen over and over again, is a pattern I've noticed for myself. The self-judgement that can come on ruminating can be paralyzing at times for myself as I wonder why I did or didn't do something. This ties in a bit with being in "INTJ" type that turns inward various judgemental actions. I'm not sure of the source but I really do like the following explanation of time Action-oriented is the way to go. We all have our moments. It's about getting up again, each time we get knocked down. @ Oscar. "Ruminating..." Zack looked down at the boy who was clinging onto his chest. "You so are." Zack sighed and laughed. "I don't even know what that word means... isn't that how animals digest food?" "Sorta..." Zack closed his eyes and felt the brunet crawl further on top of him, one of his eyes opened and he kissed the boy sensually on his cheek. He wrapped an arm around him and pulled the brunet close. "I missed you." Sora nuzzled into the hollow part of Zack's neck. "I missed you too." It was moments like these that the ex-SOL