

Rumination self-evidently makes you miserable, and also prolongs unnecessarily a physiological response that makes a huge demand on your cardiovascular and immune systems. There is a widely held view that 'a bit of stress is good for you', but nothing could be further from the truth. How could anything that has these effects be in any way good for you? Pressure is certainly useful and motivational, but all that stress offers is a short, miserable life. Resilient people don't ruminate because they know there's nothing gained by it. If worry worked there'd be worry courses you could attend!

How do we go about stopping the habit of rumination? The first step is to wake up. The Challenge of Change resilience programme is based on the principle that people are asleep most of the time, but this is not our ordinary idea of sleep. We usually think of sleep as a mixture of deep sleep, dreaming sleep and sleepwalking. After that we're awake, but this leaves out a crucial step. Think back to the last time you drove down the highway. You get to town X and then find yourself at town Y, thirty kilometres later, with no recollection of anything between the two towns. Or you listen to the news and decide to find out at the end what the weather's going to be like in your home town. Ten minutes later, you've missed the weather. Between the two towns or while the weather was broadcast, where were you? Not a blank – when you're dead you're a blank – but rather thinking about the past and the future.

We would all agree that the future is unknown and therefore a fantasy, but paradoxically, the past is also fantasy. What we call 'my life' is a story we've made up, because everything we perceive passes through a screen of our personal conditioned attitudes. Past events did occur – 9/11 happened, but we all have a different perception of it. We can intentionally go into the past or the future, for example, when a piece of work arrives on our desk and we draw on experience to plan what we're going to do. However, all

of this happens with our attention under control, going into the past and the future selectively but with the present remaining the point of reference.

The problem comes when our attention is captured by something in the past or

**As Mark Twain said, 'some of the worst things in my life never happened'.**

the future. A piece of work arrives on the desk, we take one look and groan 'not that again!' In no time we're off thinking about next weekend, our last holiday, anything except the work in front of us. This state of captured attention is what lies between the ordinary states of sleep and being awake, and is defined as waking sleep.

Of course, these pleasant reveries are hardly stressful, but since you can't work and sleep, for as long as attention is caught like this no work gets done. To bring stress into the picture we need to introduce negative emotion. A line manager gives someone a piece of work, and at the door turns back and says 'just do a better job this time, not like last week when you messed everything up!' Instead of weekends and holidays, the mind fills with what-ifs and if-onlys, fuelled by anger, fear and resentment. We not only feel miserable, the emotion provokes a physiological response that increases blood pressure and compromises immune function. The arousal itself is not really the problem: fight or flight is an appropriate and adaptive response, but only if it isn't prolonged, and the way to prolong it in the absence of anything else happening is to ruminate about it.

These first two steps of waking up and taking control of your attention allow you to connect fully with the present, where the action is. People who behave appropriately in emergencies are described as having presence of mind, which means their minds are in the present. This in turn leads to the third

step, which is to develop a detached view. 'Detachment' can suggest being aloof or cold, but what's really meant by detachment is keeping things in perspective: people who are detached don't turn molehills into mountains.

They're not unemotional, but they don't catastrophise – instead of the emotional tail wagging the dog, the dog wags the tail. When you become locked into negative rumination about 'what-ifs' and 'if-onlys' it is easy to forget that these are just thoughts. Once you've woken up and taken control of attention they can be seen for what they are, and the final step of letting go becomes possible.

If you want to catch a monkey, find a pot with a hole in it just big enough for him to squeeze his hand in, put one peanut inside, tie it to the ground and hide behind a tree. The monkey puts his hand in and grabs the peanut, but now he has a fist that's too big to pull out and you can run up and catch him. The point about the story is that while the forest is full of food, the monkey gives up his life for a peanut. All the issues we endlessly ruminate about are not resolving anything, they're just peanuts, and like the monkey, all we need to do to free our attention is to let go of the negative emotion that work comes wrapped in.

Resilience is a fundamental life skill that can be learned and perfected, and resilient people work smarter because they can negotiate the inevitable changes that are the one certainty in life. This is never more relevant than in an economic climate of instability and recession, but resilience is an equally important skill in times of growth and expansion, when the challenge is to attract and retain the best staff. Happy people stay, and the first step in ensuring a happy workforce is to not give people things to ruminate about. ■

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