

Selective memory helpful short-term but harmful long-term

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People who block out unpleasant memories or issues may enjoy short-term gains but emotionally detaching themselves causes long-term consequences, according to a University of Michigan psychology researcher.

Robin Edelstein, a U-M assistant psychology professor, focuses on social/personality psychology, memories and emotions. She and her colleagues studied victims of sexual abuse 15 years after their cases went to trial to see how many were still willing to talk about what happened to them and whether such victims tend to block out such memories.

About 80 percent brought up the crimes when asked if they'd ever been a sexual abuse victim, but 20 percent avoided mentioning the painful memory. She found that people who were victims at a younger age and those whose crimes were less severe were less likely to talk about what happened to them.

It's the people who block out or avoid painful memories, people who are detached and more avoidant who most worry Edelstein.

"Most avoidant people who are in relationships are less happy," Edelstein said. "While avoiding things can be a helpful short-term strategy, not paying attention to certain things for extended periods of time might be bad for your mental health with consequences for your physical health. All the effort to avoid anxiety actually creates more anxiety later."

In current popular culture, the "Grey's Anatomy" character Christina Yang, who drove away her fiancé by keeping him emotionally distant, is a classic example of someone who is avoidant,' she said. In last year's season finale, the character was left at the altar and felt emotionally devastated while simultaneously feeling relieved enough to declare, "I'm free."

She estimates that up to 25 percent of people can be avoidant in some form.

"They go to these great efforts to hide or forget things so they won't be hurt," Edelstein said. "To ignore something constantly, you have to actually be very vigilant to find it, then work to cover it up. If it's a situation you can control like not seeing a certain kind of movie, you can just avoid the movie but there are many situations you can't control."

In relationships, avoidant people can put off discussing issues that might cause an argument, only putting off the inevitable, leading to the pair either coming to a more serious confrontation later or simply drifting apart from never dealing with issues that need to be dealt with, she said.

On the other end of the spectrum are people who do recognize and deal with issues but spend nearly all of their time over-thinking them without actually acting on them.

"Ruminators are people who go to the other extreme," she said. "They are the ones who over-think by trying not to think about it but that only makes them think about it more and they think about it over and over. Those over-thinkers have it the hardest."

People with a healthy support system have friends or family they can talk with about difficult issues, Edelstein said. The healthiest solution is to deal with an issue, take action and move on, she said.

"The best solution is to do something about it rather than just thinking about it or hiding it," she said.

Source: University of Michigan

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