

# Family squabbles over Christmas? Re-playing arguments in detail may be the best way to cope with them

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Psychologists have found that recalling the detail of shouting matches and disagreements could help people keep incidents in perspective and stop the triggering of self-doubt and even depression. Credit: University of Exeter

The British way of dealing with family quarrels may be to sweep them under the carpet. Yet re-playing upsetting or annoying events like an argument in your head and recalling what happened in detail can in fact be therapeutic and prevent you getting quarrels out of proportion, or becoming depressed and anxious as a result.

Psychologists at the University of Exeter have found that recalling the detail of shouting matches and disagreements, including exactly who said what to whom and how, may not be destructive and prolong the tension, but could help [people](#) keep incidents in perspective and stop the triggering of self-doubt and even depression.

The advice, which comes at a time of year when tensions tend to flare up, is designed to help people keep upsetting events - including family squabbles and being forgotten from the family Christmas list - becoming deep rifts with damaging psychological consequences.

Psychologists have carried out a series of experiments and found that dealing concretely with moderately upsetting events such as arguments, which includes reviewing precisely the context of the event, how it unfolded and thinking how things could have been dealt with in another way, can be the best way to keep them in proportion.

But dwelling on why events happened and what an incident means about you or other people and its potential consequences could lead to overgeneralizing to other situations and tip into feelings of worthlessness and depression.

Repeated studies have found that people prone to depression can get worse if they excessively dwell or ruminate on a stressful incident such as a quarrel or a loss. But experiments by Exeter University psychologists have found that when individuals practised running emotional incidents through their head, focusing on sensory details and recalling exactly what happened, how it happened, and even where it happened, it helped them respond constructively and stopped them becoming so upset about a future or past stressful experience.

Professor Ed Watkins of the Mood Disorder Clinic at the University of Exeter, who has researched the impact of overthinking and 'rumination' on [mental health](#), found startling improvements in mental health among people who learn to run through upsetting events in concrete detail in this constructive fashion.

Professor Watkins said: "Christmas and the New Year can be a tricky time for many people's mood whether it be due to the colder and darker

weather, the often common family tensions and quarrels, which sometimes lead to the reopening of old grievances, finances being tight, or the triggering of unfavourable comparisons with how we want to be this year or against "picture-perfect" ideals of a Merry Christmas. We often see this in an increase in referrals for treatment for depression in January and February. Staying with the details of what happens and keeping it in context can be one way to prevent these challenges of the festive season becoming something worse."

After training to recall the details of an upsetting incident including the tone of a voice, the words used and how the event happened, people became more resilient and put the upsetting incident into context, stopping a downward spiral into low mood.

The same exercise of focusing on the sensory details of sad experiences and asking "How did it happen?" "How can I do something about it?" was also found to speed up recovery from doing badly on a test in undergraduates, and to improve interpersonal problem solving, such as finding a way to make up with your partner after an argument, in people who were currently or formerly depressed.

For people experiencing depression learning to focus on stressful incidents and to re-imagine them in full technicolour asking themselves 'What is unique about this situation?' 'How did it happen?' – instead of 'Why did it happen to me? had an a 'significant' impact on helping to alleviate mental ill health.

A clinical trial in patients with clinical depression found that daily training in spotting warning signs for stress and then reviewing stressful situations in a concrete way – by paying attention to the details of what could be seen, heard, felt, smelled and the sequence of what happened – over 6 weeks significantly reduced symptoms of depression, outperforming treatment-as-usual from the GP alone.

His findings can be applied to all situations in which people overthink difficult situations, including helping to reduce anxiety in teenagers and students about tests and exams and the depression caused by conflicts in relationships.

Professor Watkins said: "We know that rumination about upsets and losses is a big factor in getting and staying anxious and depressed. Often [clinical depression](#) can follow a difficult life event, such as losing a job, the end of a relationship, illness, or being trapped in a stressful situation. Furthermore, once people are depressed, the normal hassles and challenges of daily life can themselves lead into more rumination and get blown out of proportion, further fuelling the depression. So being more concrete by reducing the negative impact of daily hassles can help people to come out of depression,"

Professor Watkins said. "We have found in the lab that when people train themselves to think about the specific sensory details, context and sequence of an emotional event, including how it unfolded, they were more emotionally resilient to an unexpected stressor than those who thought about the meaning and implications of emotional events. Similar studies showed that when people with depression are encouraged to focus on how an upsetting event happened and how it unfolded it improved their ability to solve problems such as arguing with their partner, and with repeated practice, this can in fact hasten recovery out of [depression](#) itself."

Provided by University of Exeter

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