

Do you brood too much?

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You can control your thoughts, and learn how to stop brooding or worrying too much. Credit: Colourbox

Your mind begins to churn, and you start brooding about something that's happened or worry about what's going to happen. Most people have had this experience, and many often feel powerless to stop their brooding once it has started.

But according to Professor Hans M. Nordahl at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology's (NTNU) Unit for Psychiatry and Behavioural Medicine in the Department of Neuroscience, his work

shows that it is possible to take control of one's mind and learn to brood or worry less.

People "often confuse ruminative brooding with problem solving, analysis or review, but unfortunately the content tends to be self-critical and self-focused and linked to negative experiences in life," Nordahl says.

He believes that as human beings, we are vulnerable if we attach too much importance to our thoughts – which are often illusory – rather than relating to what is happening here and now.

Dwelling too long on worries or brooding is typical of [mental disorders](#). About a quarter of the Norwegian population suffers from [mental illness](#), and half of the population will be affected by a mental illness at one or more times in our lives, according to figures from the Norwegian Ministry of Health and Care Services.

In the service of fear

"Worry and brooding create a lot of stress, exhaustion and fatigue in [people](#). I usually illustrate it by holding a glass of water in my hand. Most people would say that's easy to do, but if I hold the glass continuously for two hours it gets heavy. It works the same way with our brooding and worries. They aren't necessarily that heavy when they're short-lived, but they get heavy when they last for a long time," Nordahl says.

More precisely, he says, brooding and worrying aren't dangerous, but they are exhausting and stressful. Everyone does it from time to time. It's only when those churning thoughts take over and pull your focus away from living your life that they can become problematic.

"We're well equipped to develop anxiety and worry, because our minds

are so capable of imagining things and our thoughts become facts. Our capacity as humans to analyse ourselves or to anticipate threatening scenarios can be used in constructive ways but can have negative and unhelpful effects as well," says Nordahl.

Whereas worry is future oriented and about what is going to happen, brooding mainly concerns past events. Worry can cause anxiety, uneasiness and insecurity, and brooding can lead to depressive symptoms.

Negative and self-focused

Fortunately, you can take steps to lessen your brooding without taking "happy pills" or going to therapy. The first thing you have to do is to realize that brooding is a waste of time and energy.

"Reducing ruminative brooding isn't as difficult as it may seem, but there are a few prerequisites you need to know before you start. The most important thing about brooding as a mental activity is to realize that brooding itself is a meaningless and useless activity. It doesn't help anything and has no calming or problem-solving effect," says Nordahl.

Ruminative brooding is distinct from other forms of thinking, such as planning or problem solving. Many people confuse these ways of thinking. Brooding is characterized by being negative, self-focused and repetitively thinking about why [negative experiences](#) occurred the way they did. As soon as you notice that you are beginning to brood, it can be helpful to ask yourself if the brooding has any purpose, or if there's actually any answer to what you're pondering.

If your perseverative thinking is of the negative type that only leads to stress and hopelessness, or what Nordahl calls "grouch recycling," it's important to let your thoughts pass and instead focus on the situation you

are in there and then.

"Get involved in other more real-life things currently happening in your life. If you focus on the here and now, the illusions – that is, the worry and brooding – won't take hold as much. The thoughts may continue to churn, but just let them be there and live their own lives. Anything that isn't given attention will gradually disappear on its own, and this also applies to one's brooding," says Nordahl.

A mental rocking chair

Turning the focus away from your thoughts does not mean trying to escape or distract yourself from them, however. Many people use television, gambling, computer games or even drugs to control or suppress the brooding. Distracting yourself in order to calm down doesn't work well in the long run. Then you're relying on other people or external things to get calm," he says.

Distraction actually has the opposite effect to calming down – it becomes connected to the brooding thoughts, according to Nordahl.

"Trying not to think of [negative thoughts](#) creates a recoil effect, because the brain has to keep track of what you shouldn't think about, and those are the very thoughts you're trying to avoid," he says. Nordahl usually compares negative brooding with sitting in a mental rocking chair. Your thoughts go back and forth without making any progress, even if you work hard.

"There's plenty else you can use your brain on than brooding. Take issue with your tendency to brood about yourself and your fate," says Nordahl. "It's your mental rocking chair, you're not getting anywhere with it, and it's wasting powers that you could instead use to live your life with others in the present."

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