

[Wellness](#)

Brooding about not reaching a goal or resolution? Here are 5 questions to ask yourself.



By Galadriel Watson

Dec. 4, 2019 at 4:00 a.m. PST

Lately, I've been brooding about the fact I haven't published a novel. I've written five manuscripts, and I've come close to having one of them published. But I'm not getting younger, and I've been striving for well over a decade. I've been pondering about whether I should continue or give up.

Then I read that how I think about my goals may be an important part of achieving them, so I turned to some experts for advice. I learned that there are harmful and helpful ways of considering your progress in pursuing a goal, whether you're trying to advance your career, lose weight, build a healthier relationship or become a novelist. Here are some questions to ask yourself.

Am I thinking abstractly or concretely?

“Pursuing goals is fundamental to human experience, and when we encounter difficulties with our goals, we know that this can elicit rumination,” says Henrietta Roberts, a psychology researcher at the United Kingdom’s University of Exeter, who co-authored a [recent study](#) on rumination and unresolved personal goals. Rumination occurs when you repetitively think about a problem, even when there’s nothing going on around you that would cause you to think about it — like in the middle of the night.

There are two extremes on the rumination spectrum. “Ruminating about our goals in a more abstract manner may be unhelpful and make it difficult to regulate negative moods,” Roberts says. “Focusing about our goals in a more concrete way might be more helpful.”

Abstract rumination means you think about the bigger picture causes, meanings and consequences of a problem. For example, you may ask, *What have I done to deserve this?* or *Why does this always happen to me?*

Concrete rumination means you pose questions such as *What is the problem?* and *How can I get around it?* By thinking about the particular details of a situation, Roberts says, “We may be able to spot things that we can do to help change this or progress toward the place that we want to be.”

Lindsay Brancato is a Washington-area clinical psychologist and psychoanalyst. “I think you can get lost in the weeds,” she says. “When people get really stuck in an abstract way of thinking, then they really do get stuck. It’s almost like they don’t see a way out, can’t see the steps to get out of it.” She suggests that you try to slow down and observe your thoughts, look at where you are now and where you want to go, and then figure out the specific actions you need to take to bridge the two.

Am I being too hard on myself?

Brancato also recommends having more self-compassion. Ruminating isn’t easy to stop, so don’t beat yourself up for doing it. Instead, forgive yourself — both for the tendency to ruminate and for whatever situation is causing it in the first place — and understand that you’re human.

Then be proactive and educate yourself about rumination. See if you can apply what you’ve learned to your own life. For example, try to discern your red flags: When do you start getting caught in negative thoughts? “The knowledge equals power and control and choice,” she says. “Because then you can say to yourself, ‘This is happening. These negative thoughts aren’t going to get me anywhere.’” Next, you can attempt to shift your thinking toward the more concrete.

Have I lost a sense of control?

Jutta Joormann teaches psychology at Yale University and has co-authored many rumination studies, including [one that found that rumination makes people more likely to feel regret](#) after making important decisions. “A lot of the rumination is actually something that happens pretty automatically,” she says. “You may not even be aware that you’ve been doing it. All of a sudden you’re like, ‘What am I thinking about now? This is not what is helpful.’ It’s extremely

unpleasant for people to have this capture their thinking at random times, and feeling that you have no control over it if you want to stop it.”

To minimize the negative effects, she says: “Limit it to a certain time of day. And limit it to a certain period of time, so you’re not constantly in this ruminative cycle. It sounds kind of silly, but basically you can tell yourself, ‘Okay, I’m not going to do this right now, but tonight between 5 p.m. and 6 p.m., I will allow myself half an hour of rumination.’ ” This will at least give you a feeling of control.

Do I need help from a specialist?

What if you’ve tried educating yourself about these thought processes and applying what you’ve learned, but still find yourself caught in a negative loop? Then, Brancato says, “It probably is a good idea to be working with somebody” to gain insight into the underlying factors that may influence your tendency to ruminate. This is particularly important if rumination gets in the way of how you function in everyday life, makes you feel unworthy or bad, or creates anxiety.

Roberts says heavy rumination can be closely associated with depression. “If someone is distressed by high levels of rumination, then I would recommend seeking clinical guidance.” She advises looking into mindfulness-based cognitive therapy and rumination-focused cognitive behavioral therapy.

Joormann, who also has researched the tie between rumination and depression, recommends a specialist as well, “because this is likely not going to go away by itself.”

Should I rethink my goal?

“Setting extremely high standards for ourselves is likely to make it hard to achieve our goals,” Roberts says, “and leaves us more susceptible to high levels of rumination and distress when we encounter a setback.”

In some situations, it may be best to give up on the goal entirely. “If our circumstances change and a particular goal becomes unachievable, then it may be more beneficial to find a way to let go of that goal and refocus our efforts on something else,” Roberts says. “Becoming stuck ruminating about the lost goal might be likely to make us feel worse, without enabling us to get the outcome that we’d wanted.”

As for my future as a novelist, I feel like my thoughts waver between the abstract (*I’m awful at this*) and concrete (*Tomorrow I’ll look up more potential publishers*). But one of Joormann’s comments gave me hope. She says research has shown that people with heightened creativity, such as writers and musicians, may have a hard time disengaging from rumination and giving up on their goals. “And that sort of keeps you at a topic longer,” she says, which “may increase creativity.” On the downside, these same thought processes also link to depression.

Thankfully, depression isn’t an issue for me. But I do have a terrible time giving up — on the big picture, at least. While I’ll continue to revise and send out manuscripts, I’ve decided I won’t be

writing a new novel anytime soon. Instead, I have an idea for a graphic novel swirling about in my head. Yes, it keeps me awake at night — but in a useful, concrete kind of way.