Caution: Long Bouts of Fretful Ruminating May Be Hazardous To Your Health

A brief unpleasant encounter with your boss could trigger a morning of angry brooding. Worry over the latest crisis in an aging parent’s declining health may preoccupy you during an exercise workout. These prolonged interludes of unpleasant ruminating about the past or future seem harmless enough. But it turns out they may not be; they tend to ramp up stress—and this amplified stress may raise blood pressure, a novel new study suggests. This could affect our health because high blood pressure increases the risk for heart attacks and strokes. The new findings are published in the September issue of *Psychosomatic Medicine*, journal of the American Psychosomatic Society.

Our immediate reactions to stressful incidents aren’t all that matters for health. How long we mentally dwell on these troubling daily problems apparently also affects our stress level: “More time ruminating is associated with more stress and, in turn, higher blood pressure,” says lead study author Jeffrey Birk, PhD, Instructor in Medical Sciences at Columbia University Irving Medical Center. He worked with colleagues Joseph Schwartz, PhD, Talea Cornelius, PhD, and Donald Edmonson, PhD.

The study involved 373 healthy, mostly middle-aged participants who wore portable blood pressure cuffs for 24 hours. Blood pressure readings were taken automatically every half hour. After each daytime reading, participants were asked if they had thoughts during the prior 10 minutes that had previously made them, angry, annoyed, sad, worried, anxious or none of the above. If they did have such thoughts, they were asked about the duration (on a scale from “very briefly” to “more than eight minutes”) and also how overwhelmed they felt just before the blood pressure reading (on a scale of “not at all” to “very much”).

People who ruminated more often also tended to dwell longer on each episode. The longer they spent ruminating, the more stressed they were and the higher their blood pressure was, says Birk. The overall effect from moment to moment was somewhat small, but significant for both systolic and diastolic readings. The link between longer brooding and higher blood pressure could be accounted for, at least in part, by the increase in stress associated with these interludes of ruminating, Birk adds.

The scientists controlled for many other conditions that can affect blood pressure or stress, such as posture, exertion level, whether the person was home or at work, and whether they had recently eaten, drunk alcohol or smoked.
It’s possible that constant worriers or brooders who develop cardiovascular disease may find themselves in a health-endangering feedback loop, says Birk. “We also study heart patients, and we see that they often experience psychological distress related to their condition,” he notes. If this stress leads patients to spend more time worrying, it may raise their blood pressure and potentially worsen health.

So, what can any of us do to halt an avalanche of sad, angry or anxious thoughts? “There’s evidence that simply distracting yourself stops ruminating in its tracks,” Birk says. Interacting with other people, pursuing hobbies or entertainment, reading a good book—whatever distracts will work in the short term. For longer-term help, cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) can effectively challenge negative thought patterns including a tendency to view problems as catastrophes. Widely available mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) programs also can help people stay in the moment, teaching them to notice when their minds stray into destructive brooding territory.

Study Link:

Faculty Web Page Link:
https://www.genmed.columbia.edu/research-labs/jeffrey-l-birk-phd

The American Psychosomatic Society (APS) (http://www.psychosomatic.org), founded in 1942, is an international multidisciplinary academic society that conducts an annual scientific meeting and educational programs. Psychosomatic Medicine is its scientific journal. The membership of over 700 is composed of academic scientists and clinicians in medicine, psychiatry, epidemiology, health psychology and allied health services. The mission of the APS is “to advance and integrate the scientific study of biological, psychological, behavioral and social factors in health and disease.”