

How Depressing Thoughts Mess With Your Memory (M)

Memory problems are one of the lesser known symptoms of depression.

People who are thinking depressing thoughts find their working memory capacity is reduced, a study confirms.

This is because the attention of people thinking depressing thoughts is automatically attracted to other depressing things.

Working memory is vital to our ability to hold information in short-term memory and manipulate it.

The study's authors explain:

"For example, remembering a grocery list requires maintaining list items while also attending to competing demands such as those inherent in navigating one's way through the grocery store.

Indeed, complex span performance is broadly associated with higher-order cognitive performance both in and out of the laboratory." ([Hubbard et al., 2015](#))

Memory problems and depression

The study helps explain why depression is frequently linked to problems concentrating and with day-to-day memory.

The problem is that when the mind is taken up with depressing thoughts, it finds it difficult to concentrate on ordinary, everyday goals.

For the study, people were asked to remember various pieces of information while they were being periodically disrupted.

In fact, just like people have to do every day.

Sometimes, though, the interruptions were neutral and other times depressing.

People who were thinking depressing thoughts found it more difficult to ignore the depressing information and they got distracted.

The authors explain:

"Results from these studies imply that mood-congruent information [in other words the depressing interruptions] evokes controlled attention deficits in individuals with depressed mood.

If mood-congruent information is not able to be efficiently removed from the focus of attention, we would expect this to result in a relative decrease in working-memory capacity for individuals with depressed mood compared to those without depressed mood."

The study's authors concluded:

"Such deficits take a personal toll on these individuals with depressed mood and have societal consequences via loss of productivity and an increased rate of disability.

It is likely that persistent thinking about affectively negative, mood congruent information ... can impair real-world functioning for those with depressed mood."