

It's already over

A short book about going over old mistakes again and again, as though one more time through will change how they ended

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First edition

Written by AI with human guidance. It can contain mistakes, which later editions correct.

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Before you start

This is a short book and you can read it in two or three sittings. It's about one habit. Something you did or said, months or years ago, comes back into your head. You go through it again from the start. You reach the same ending you reached last time, you flinch, and an hour or a week later you go through it again.

I'm going to argue three things. The first is that the replays feel useful, and the feeling is understandable. They seem to be how you learn from the mistake, pay for it and guard against repeating it. The second is that they do none of those jobs. Whatever the mistake had to teach, you got from it early, and the four-hundredth replay adds nothing to the second. What prevents a repeat is a lesson you can state and a plan you can follow. The third is practical. Each old mistake can be gone through once, properly, on paper, with a few particular questions. After that you owe it no more of your evenings, and there's a simple way to respond when it turns up again. Chapters 12 to 14 cover that.

A few things this book isn't. It isn't a case for shrugging off what you've done. Chapter 9 is about the mistakes that still have something in them to mend, and it asks more of you than the replays ever did. It doesn't tell you that regret is foolish either. Some of the things you regret were real losses, and chapter 10 treats them as such.

Four cautions.

If you've been low for weeks, with little interest in things, poor sleep and a sense of hopelessness, the replaying may be part of depression and not a habit standing on its own. Please see a GP. In England you can also refer yourself to NHS talking therapies. Chapter 14 says more.

If what comes back is a frightening or violent event, such as an accident, an assault or a death, and it comes as flashbacks, nightmares or vivid images, that isn't the habit this book describes. The NHS lists those as the main symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, which has treatments of its own. Please talk to a GP.

If the thoughts are about harm you fear you may have done or might do, and you find yourself checking, confessing or repeating things in your head to cancel them out, that pattern may be obsessive compulsive disorder. It's treatable, and a GP or a talking therapies service is the place to start.

And if any of this comes with thoughts of ending your life or harming yourself, please get help today. In England that means NHS 111, an urgent GP appointment, or 999 if you're in immediate danger.

The notes at the back give the studies I've relied on and their limits. Where I'm giving my own reasoning and not a finding, I'll say so.

At the washing line

It's Sunday, late afternoon, and you're hanging out washing.

Your hands know the job, so your mind is free, and into the free space comes the photocopier. It was eleven years ago. A colleague's father had died, and she'd been off for two weeks. On her first morning back you met her at the photocopier. You wanted to say something kind. What came out was, "Well, at least it was quick."

You see her face again. It didn't crumple or harden. It went blank, in the way of someone who is deciding to be polite. She said, "Yes," and picked up her copies and went. You stood there with the machine humming.

At the washing line you go through it from the start. You see the corridor, her coming towards you, and the half-second in which you chose the words. You try out the things you might have said. "I'm so sorry about your dad." That would have done. It was there to be said, and you didn't say it. You get to her face again, and then to "Yes". You make a small noise out loud, something between a groan and a word, and you peg a towel harder than it needs. Then the washing is done and you go inside, and it fades.

She left the firm nine years ago. You've no idea where she is now. If you had to put a number on it, you've been through that scene about four hundred times.

You may not have a photocopier. Yours might be a wedding speech, an email sent to the wrong person, or a thing you shouted at your mother. It might be much larger. It could be the flat you sold two

years before prices doubled, a job you turned down, or a relationship you let go of, or stayed in too long. It could be something you did to another person that was plainly wrong. This book is meant for all of these, though the larger ones get chapters of their own later on. For now the small one will do, because the small ones show the habit most clearly. Nobody could say that a clumsy sentence from eleven years ago needs four hundred hearings. It gets them all the same.

I'll use a few terms. **The event** is what happened, which took about eight seconds and ended eleven years ago. **A replay** is one spell of going over it, from the moment it arrives in your head until something breaks it off. **The ending** is the point every replay arrives at. In this case it's her face and "Yes".

Replays have some regular features. This list is my own observation and not a research finding.

They arrive uninvited, and mostly when your mind is idle. You might be in the shower, in the car, in bed or at the washing line. You didn't decide to think about the photocopier. It came up while you were thinking of nothing in particular.

They're repeats. It's the same scene, in the same order, with the same ending. If a friend described watching a recording four hundred times in the hope that the final score would change, you'd be worried about them.

Your body joins in. You flinch, or groan, or say something out loud, or your face goes hot. The event is eleven years old and the shame is fresh each time.

And they don't finish. A replay never ends with "right, that's settled". It ends because the phone rings, or the washing's done, or you fall asleep. It gets interrupted, and an interruption leaves the thing open for next time.

That last feature is the one I'd most like you to keep in mind. If replays were a way of working something out, they'd reach a result now and then. Four hundred of them have reached the same blank face.

Before chapter 2, if you're willing, make a short list. Write down the three or four events that come back most often. For each, put roughly how long ago it happened and a rough guess at how many times you've been through it. Then, beside each one, write down anything the most recent replay told you that you didn't know before. You don't need to do anything about the list. I expect that last column will be empty, and I'd like you to see that for yourself instead of taking my word.

What the replays seem to be for

If replays were plainly useless, you'd have stopped long ago. People don't keep up a habit for eleven years unless it seems to be doing something. So this chapter takes the replays' side and asks what they appear to offer. I count five things.

They seem to be how you learn. You made a mistake, and thoughtful people look at their mistakes. Going back over it feels like study.

They seem to be how you understand. Why did you say that? What's wrong with you that those were the words that came out? It feels as though the answer is in there somewhere, and one more pass might find it.

They seem to be how you pay. You hurt someone, or embarrassed yourself, or wasted something valuable. Feeling bad about it seems only right. The flinch at the washing line is a small instalment on what you owe.

They seem to keep you careful. As long as the photocopier stays fresh, you won't do it again. The replay works as a warning sign that you keep freshly painted.

And they seem to show what kind of person you are. Someone who could say a thing like that and never think of it again would be callous. You're not callous, and the replays are your proof.

I take all of these seriously. Each one is attached to a real need. You do want to learn from what goes wrong, and to understand yourself. You want to take responsibility for harm you've done, to avoid doing it again and to be a person with a conscience. None of that is up for debate in this book. If the replays delivered those things, I'd tell you to carry on.

There's research showing how convincing the sense of usefulness is. Sonja Lyubomirsky and Susan Nolen-Hoeksema ran a set of studies in the early 1990s on what psychologists call rumination, which means dwelling repeatedly on your troubles and what they say about you. They asked some people to spend time focusing on themselves and their feelings, and asked others to think about neutral things. Among people who were already in a low mood, those who'd been dwelling reported feeling that they were gaining insight into themselves and their problems. They were also less willing to go and do something pleasant, even when they agreed they'd enjoy it. The researchers' suggestion was that the two go together. If dwelling feels like the route to understanding, then going for a walk feels like running away from the work.

So the sense of insight is a regular product of dwelling. It comes whether or not any insight has arrived, which is why it can't be used as evidence. You'll know the feeling. Partway through a replay there's often a sense of getting close to something, as if this time you'll finally see why you did it. Then you reach her face and "Yes", and you're where you were.

Other researchers have looked at what people believe about this kind of thinking. Costas Papageorgiou and Adrian Wells built a questionnaire to measure positive beliefs about rumination, and

went on to propose a model in which those beliefs keep the dwelling going. As later researchers summarise it, believing that going over things will help you solve your problems is part of what sends you back to go over them. You return to the scene because you think the return is productive.

Here's the approach for the next five chapters. Each takes one of the jobs the replays seem to do, and asks whether they do it. I'll look at learning, understanding how you could have done it, what others think, paying, and staying careful. I'm not going to argue that you should care less. The argument is that the replays aren't how the caring gets anything done.

"I'm learning from it"

This is the most respectable reason for a replay, so I'll start with what's right about it.

Thinking about how things might have gone differently is one of the more useful things a mind does. Psychologists call these thoughts counterfactuals, and you'd know them as "if only". Kai Epstude and Neal Roese have reviewed a large body of experiments on them. Their conclusion is that such thoughts exist to improve future behaviour. "If only I'd left ten minutes earlier" turns into "next time I'll leave ten minutes earlier". The thought about the past produces an intention, and the intention changes what you do. On their account that's the useful route. The thought does its work by handing you something specific to do next time.

So ask what the photocopier has to teach. I'd put it like this. When someone has been bereaved, say you're sorry and then stop talking. Don't reach for a silver lining.

That's one sentence, and I'd guess you had it within a day of the event, certainly by the second or third replay. It's a good lesson and you've probably followed it ever since. The question for this chapter is what replays four to four hundred were for. They can't have been for learning that sentence, since you already had it. If there were a second lesson in the scene, eleven years is long enough to have found it.

There's a reason the later replays don't yield anything, and it's to do with the kind of thinking they involve. Edward Watkins and Michelle Moulds ran a study with forty depressed patients and forty people who'd never been depressed. They tested everyone's ability to solve everyday social problems. Then they had people dwell on themselves in one of two ways. One way was abstract, turning over why things are as they are and what it all means. The other was concrete, attending to the particulars of how things happen, step by step. Among the depressed patients, the concrete kind of thinking improved their problem solving compared with the abstract kind. Both groups had thought about the same subject. They differed only in the way they'd thought about it.

Now listen to what a replay sounds like once it's past the opening scene. "Why did I say that? What is wrong with me? Why do I always do this? What must she have thought of me?" Those are abstract questions about causes and meanings and your character, and they don't have answers you can act on. The useful version would ask different things. What happened, in order? What did I do? What would I do in the same spot now? That version is over quickly, because the questions have answers. Replays run long because nothing in them can be answered.

In a related set of studies, Lyubomirsky and Nolen-Hoeksema had people in a low mood either dwell on themselves or turn their attention elsewhere for a few minutes. Then everyone was given interpersonal problems to solve. The ones who'd been dwelling produced less effective solutions. The ones who'd been distracted did as well as people who weren't low at all. A spell of dwelling made people worse at the very thing the dwelling claims to be for.

You might object that some lessons take time. "I didn't understand what went wrong in my marriage until years afterwards." I believe you. But look at how that understanding arrived. My guess is that it came from something new. It may have been a conversation, a book, a second relationship that showed you the pattern, or just being older. It didn't come from the four-hundredth pass through unchanged material. New understanding needs new information, and a replay has none. It can only show you what's already in it.

So there's a simple check you can use whenever a replay starts. Ask what this one has told you that the last one didn't. If the answer is nothing, then it isn't study, whatever it feels like. You've been learning from this mistake for eleven years, and the lesson took a day.

"I should have known"

Some replays are about a decision, where the photocopier was a moment of clumsiness. You sold the flat in 2016 and watched the street double in price. You turned down the job with the small company that everyone has now heard of. You stayed three years too long with someone, or left someone you now think you should have kept. You didn't push your father to see a doctor in March.

These replays have their own refrain, which is "I should have known". The signs were there. Anyone could have seen where prices were going. He'd been tired for months. How could you have been so blind?

The answer is that you weren't blind. You're looking back from a place where the ending is known, and that changes what the past looks like. Psychologists have studied this for fifty years under the name hindsight bias. Neal Roese and Kathleen Vohs, reviewing the research, describe it as the belief that an event was more predictable than it really was, once you know it happened. They break it into parts. One is memory distortion. People misremember what they thought at the time, in the direction of what turned out to be true. Another is a sense of inevitability, the feeling that it had to go that way. The third is a belief about yourself, that you could have foreseen it.

They also describe how it comes about. Once you know the outcome, you recall the facts that fit it and lose sight of the ones that didn't. The story of how it happened becomes easy to tell, and

that ease gets mistaken for how likely it was beforehand. One consequence they name is a fixed attention on a single explanation of the past, to the neglect of other reasonable ones.

Apply that to the flat. In 2016 you had some facts. Prices had been flat for two years. You needed the money for a move. An agent told you it was a fair offer, and a newspaper you respected said the market had peaked. You also had some facts pointing the other way, and they're the only ones you remember now. Your replays go straight to the friend who said "I'd hold on if I were you", and they never stop at the newspaper. The you of 2016 weighed a mixed picture and made a reasonable call. The you of today marks that call against an answer sheet nobody had in 2016.

It's like failing a student for not knowing something that was discovered after the exam.

An objection. "But some people did know. My friend held on to her flat." Some people guessed the other way and were right. Others guessed the other way on a different occasion and were wrong, and you don't hear about it because nobody replays a disaster they avoided by luck. That your friend was right is evidence that the outcome was possible. It doesn't show that it was knowable. If it had been knowable, the price in 2016 would already have reflected it.

A second objection is stronger. "Sometimes I really did ignore what I knew. I had a bad feeling about him from the start." Then that's a real lesson, and it takes one sentence to state, as in chapter 3. "When I have a bad feeling early on, I'll take it seriously enough to slow down." That's worth having. But be careful even here. You've

had bad feelings about plenty of things that turned out fine, and you don't remember those, because nothing happened to fix them in your mind. Hindsight picks out the one bad feeling that was followed by trouble and presents it as a warning you wilfully ignored.

There's a question that undoes a good deal of this, and it becomes part of the method in chapter 12. **What did I know then?** I don't mean what was true, or what you know now. I mean what you had in your hands on the day, including the facts that pointed the wrong way. Write it down as if you were making the case for your earlier self. You'll usually find that the decision was a fair one on the evidence, made by someone doing their best with a mixed picture, and that it turned out badly. "I made a reasonable decision and it went badly" is a sadder sentence than "I was a fool", in a way, because it means the world is less controllable than you'd like. But it's the true one, and it doesn't need going over four hundred times.

"Nobody's forgotten"

A lot of replays are about an audience. You said "at least it was quick", and she heard it, and now she knows you're the kind of person who says such things. Perhaps she told others. Somewhere out there is a version of you that exists in other people's heads, fixed at your worst moment, and the replay is you staring at it.

So how much of the event is still in anyone's head but yours?

Kenneth Savitsky, Nicholas Epley and Thomas Gilovich ran four studies on this. People either imagined committing a social blunder, or went through a public failure in the laboratory, or were described to others in an embarrassing way. Then they predicted how harshly observers would judge them, and the researchers compared that with how the observers did judge them. People expected to be judged more harshly than they were. The researchers found the reason in where attention goes. The person who made the blunder is fixed on the blunder. Observers take in much more. They see the rest of the person and the situation, and they have their own concerns. The blunder is a small part of what they see.

You can test this on yourself, and I'd encourage you to do it now. Think back eleven years. List the clumsy, tactless or foolish things that other people said to you, or in front of you, that year. I don't mean cruelty, which does stick. I mean ordinary gaffes, of the kind you're replaying.

I'd be surprised if you got past two, and for most people it's none. It isn't that nobody around you said anything foolish in a whole year. They did, weekly. You didn't keep it, because other people's gaffes aren't interesting enough to store. Your memory is full of your own life. Everyone else's memory is the same, and that includes your colleague's.

I can't tell you she's forgotten. She may remember it. Bereaved people often do remember who said what. But consider what she'd remember it as. In those weeks she'll have heard a dozen clumsy things from people who meant well, because nobody knows what to say. If yours has stayed with her at all, I'd guess it's filed with the others under "people were awkward, bless them". It's unlikely to be the defining fact about you. The blank face you've replayed four hundred times was probably the face of a tired woman on her first day back, who'd already heard three of these and had copying to do.

There's another reason to distrust the version in your head, and it comes from research on social anxiety. After a conversation or a performance, some people go over and over how it went. Researchers call this post-event processing. A recent review of that research by Aidan Flynn and Lira Yoon reports that it's tied to negative biases in memory. It also runs in both directions with how people rate their own performance. Going over the event makes the rating worse, and a worse rating prompts more going over. In other words, the replay isn't a neutral recording. Each pass can darken it a little. By the four-hundredth, her expression has had years of touching up. You have no way now of getting back to what her face did on the day.

The objection here is obvious. "In my case people really do remember. I made a scene at my brother's wedding and the family still brings it up." Some events are public and memorable, and I won't pretend otherwise. But if people do remember, then ask what the replays do about that. They don't change what anyone remembers. If there's something to be done about your standing with your family, it's an apology or a changed way of behaving, and that's chapter 9. The replay works on the picture inside your head, and nobody else can see that picture.

What I take from this chapter is that the audience is mostly imaginary. You're the only one who was at all four hundred showings.

"I deserve to feel bad about it"

For some mistakes, the replay is mainly about justice. You did something that hurt someone, or you failed someone who was counting on you. It seems wrong that you should be able to hang out the washing on a sunny afternoon with a quiet mind. The flinch feels like the least you owe.

I'm going to be careful here, because there's something right in this. Feeling bad after doing harm is how a conscience works. A large body of research on guilt finds that it pushes people towards repair. They apologise, put things right and treat people better afterwards. If you felt nothing about the photocopier, something would be missing in you. The first flush of "oh no, what did I say" was your conscience doing its job.

But consider what that feeling is for. It's a prompt, and it points at actions. Go after her and say, "I'm sorry, that came out wrong. I'm so sorry about your dad." Or, if the moment has gone, do better next time. Guilt gets you to do those things, and once you've done what can be done, it has nothing more to get you to do.

The replays are something else. They're the prompt going off long after every available action has been taken or has expired, and they've turned from a message into a sentence that you serve. My question about that sentence is who receives the payment. Your colleague gets nothing from your bad quarter of an hour at the washing line. She doesn't know about it. Her father is no less dead,

her first morning back was no easier, and whatever she felt at the photocopier isn't soothed by anything you've felt since. If suffering were a currency, yours isn't reaching her.

It's not even clear that the suffering makes you a better person. Juliana Breines and Serena Chen ran four experiments on how people respond to their own failings. They asked some participants to take a kind and understanding attitude towards a weakness or a recent wrong, and compared them with participants who weren't asked to. You might expect the kind attitude to make people complacent. It did the reverse. Those participants were more motivated to make amends and to avoid repeating the wrong, and after failing a test they spent longer studying for the next one. The harsh attitude, which feels like taking the thing seriously, didn't do better at producing change.

There's also correlational evidence. Don Davis and colleagues pooled the studies on self-forgiveness and wellbeing, 65 samples with nearly 18,000 people. People who were more able to forgive themselves had better psychological wellbeing, with a correlation of .45, which is substantial for this kind of research. A correlation can't tell you which causes which, so I won't lean on it hard. But it's the opposite of what you'd expect if endless self-reproach were good for people.

The objection is one I'd make myself. "This is all very convenient. I do something bad and then a book tells me to be nice to myself about it. That's letting myself off the hook."

Think about what the hook is. Being held to account for something means facing what you did without excuses, putting right what can be put right, and changing so that it doesn't happen again. Chapter 9 will ask you to do the first two. The replays do none of the three. They don't look squarely at what happened, because they skid straight to the worst second and your own shame. Nobody is repaid by them. And Breines and Chen's work suggests they're a worse route to changing than kindness is. A person who stops replaying and writes the apology has climbed further on to the hook. The one who replays for another eleven years has found a way to feel responsible without doing anything about it.

I'd also say that the punishment has long since lost any sense of proportion. You wouldn't sentence anyone else to four hundred bad quarter-hours for eight clumsy seconds at a photocopier. If a friend told you they'd been doing this to themselves, you'd be dismayed, and you'd think no less of their conscience for stopping.

So keep the guilt that points at something to do. The rest is suffering that's addressed to no one and improves nothing, and you're allowed to stop it.

"If I stop, I'll do it again"

This belief is the quietest of the five and, I think, the one with the firmest grip on people. The replays feel like a guard on duty. As long as the photocopier still stings, you'll never again say something crass to a grieving person. If it stopped stinging, you might get careless. So you keep it sore deliberately, or at least you don't dare let it heal.

Here are two pieces of evidence from your own life.

First, you haven't done it again. In eleven years you've spoken to other bereaved people, and I'd bet you've been gentle and brief and said you were sorry. What was steering you in those conversations? It wasn't a replay. You weren't running the corridor scene in your head while you talked to them. It was the one-sentence lesson from chapter 3, which has long since become how you behave. The replays happen at washing lines and in the shower, when no bereaved person is anywhere near. They're not present at the moments when you'd need a guard.

Second, think of the mistakes you made once, learned from, and never replay. Years ago you backed into a gatepost, and now you check the mirror. You once sent an email in anger and had to apologise, and now you wait till morning. Those lessons hold perfectly well with no replays to maintain them. You don't have to keep flinching about the gatepost in order to look in the mirror. The guard theory says lessons only hold if they're kept painful, and your own record shows plenty of lessons holding with no pain at all.

A mistake is kept from recurring by two things, and both are dull. One is a lesson stated clearly enough to act on. The other is a plan for the situation where it applies. "When I'm about to speak to someone who's grieving, then I'll say I'm sorry and ask how they're doing, and nothing else." You don't remember to buy milk by chanting "milk" for a week. You write it on the list, and then you're free to forget it until you're in the shop.

There's research suggesting that the writing down is what lets the mind stand down. E. J. Masicampo and Roy Baumeister ran a series of studies on unfinished goals. They gave people a goal and left it unfulfilled. Those people then had intrusive thoughts about it during an unrelated reading task, and did worse on other work, because part of their mind was still on the unfinished thing. That much was already known. What Masicampo and Baumeister added was the next step. When people were allowed to make a specific plan for the unfinished goal, saying when, where and how they'd deal with it, the intrusions stopped. They hadn't completed the goal. They had only planned it, and that was enough for the mind to stop raising the matter.

Their studies were about tasks, not about old mistakes, so applying them here is my interpretation. But it fits the features from chapter 1. Replays arrive uninvited, in idle moments, and they never conclude. That's how an open item behaves. Some part of your mind has the photocopier filed under unfinished business and brings it up whenever there's spare attention, in the hope that this time it'll get settled. The replay never settles it, because a replay contains no verdict and no plan. So it stays open and comes round again.

If that's right, then the way to reduce replays isn't to fight them. You give the open item what it's been waiting for. That means a clear account of what happened, a lesson you can state, a plan for next time, and a decision about whether anything remains to be done. Chapter 12 sets out how to do it. The guard can stand down because there'll be something better in his place.

You may worry that you'll become careless. A person with a written lesson and a plan is more careful than a person with a recurring flinch, because the lesson and plan are there when they're needed. The flinch only ever turned up at the washing line.

What the replays cost

The last five chapters argued that the replays don't deliver what they promise. This one is about what they take. I've left it until now because I didn't want to open the book by lecturing you about harm. You know the replays are unpleasant. But it's worth seeing the whole cost in one place, and some of it is less obvious than the bad quarter-hours.

The best summary of the research is a review by Susan Nolen-Hoeksema, Blair Wisco and Sonja Lyubomirsky, which drew together about twenty years of studies on rumination. They list the effects that are well supported. Rumination makes low mood worse. It makes thinking more negative and impairs problem solving. It gets in the way of taking useful action, and it wears down support from other people. They also report that it predicts the onset of depression, and that it's linked to anxiety, binge eating and binge drinking.

Some of that comes from following people over time. In one study, Nolen-Hoeksema, Jannay Morrow and Barbara Fredrickson had 79 people keep a record for thirty days of their moods and what they did when their mood dropped. The more a person responded to low moods by dwelling on them, the longer their low moods lasted. That held even after allowing for how bad the mood was to begin with.

I should be clear about the limits. Much of this research is about dwelling on low mood and its causes in general, and your replays of a particular old mistake are one variety of that. Some of the

studies involved people who were already depressed or low. I'm not suggesting the photocopier will make you ill. I'm saying the general direction of the evidence is consistent. This kind of thinking makes people feel worse and work less well, and nobody has found that it makes them wiser.

Here are the costs as I'd list them for an ordinary replayer. These are my own observations.

There's the time. If a replay takes ten minutes and you have three or four events on rotation, that's easily a few hours a month spent watching yourself fail. The hours usually come out of moments that might have been restful, like the shower, the walk or the washing line on a sunny afternoon. The replays take over exactly the parts of the day when your mind was free to enjoy being idle.

There's the mood. A replay leaves a residue. You come in from the garden a little lower than you went out, and you don't always know why. Do that several times a week for years and your background weather is greyer than it needed to be.

There's what it does to your picture of yourself. If the events you revisit most are your worst ones, then your sense of who you are gets built from an unrepresentative sample. In eleven years you've had thousands of conversations that went fine and many where you were kind or funny or useful. You've replayed none of those. If you judged a colleague by the same method, you'd be called unfair.

There's avoidance. This one is easy to miss. After the photocopier, you may have become wary of bereaved people altogether. You send a card in place of speaking, or find you're busy when the

colleague with the sick wife comes into the kitchen. The replay has taught you that these conversations are dangerous, so you dodge them, and the people who'd have been glad of a kind word don't get one. That cost is paid by other people.

And there's the present. While you're at the washing line in the corridor of eleven years ago, you're not in the garden. Your child is telling you something and you're half listening. You miss a turning. You make a small new mistake because your attention was on an old one.

Set against all that is what the replays provide, which the last five chapters put at close to nothing. You have the lesson and the conscience already, and other people don't see any of it.

I said in the preface that this isn't a book about caring less. Everything you care about in this area is served better by something other than replaying. That includes learning, accountability, carefulness and being decent to people. The next two chapters are about what that something is, first for mistakes that can still be mended and then for those that can't.

The ones you can still mend

Go back to the list you made after chapter 1. For each event, ask a question the replays have never asked. Is there anything here that can still be done?

Often there's nothing. The colleague left nine years ago, the moment was small, and tracking her down to apologise for one sentence would be more for your benefit than hers. With events like that, the only work left is the write-up in chapter 12.

But with some events there is something to do. You owe somebody money, or an apology that would mean something to them. There's a rift with your sister that began with something you said. A friend you dropped during a bad year of your own never knew why. You promised your father something and haven't done it.

Replaying and mending are rivals. It would be natural to assume that someone who replays a wrong four hundred times is the person most likely to put it right. My impression is the opposite. The replay produces a feeling of having dealt with the matter. You've thought about it a great deal and you've suffered over it. It seems as though that must count for something. So the phone call doesn't get made, because in some inner ledger the debt is being serviced. Meanwhile your sister, who can't see your ledger, has had seven years of silence.

If an event on your list has something mendable in it, then mending it is the most effective thing you can do about the replays, and also the right thing. Chapter 7 described how an open item

keeps coming round until it's given a plan. For these events the plan is obvious. You've been avoiding it because it's harder than flinching.

I can't offer research on exactly how to apologise that I've checked to my own satisfaction, so what follows is my own view.

Keep it short. "I've thought for a long time about what I said at Dad's seventieth. It was unkind and it wasn't true, and I'm sorry." That's enough. A long apology starts to be about you.

Don't explain yourself much. Reasons shade into excuses easily. One sentence of context at most.

Ask for nothing. Don't ask to be forgiven or reassured, or even answered. "You don't need to reply to this" is a generous line to include. The other person may have made their peace with it long ago, or may still be angry, and either way they don't owe you relief.

Expect it to feel out of proportion. After years of replays the event is enormous to you. The other person may say, "Oh, I'd forgotten all about that." That can be oddly deflating, but it's the best result there is. Or they may say, "Thank you, that did hurt," in which case you've done something that mattered.

There are times not to do it. If contacting the person would disturb or frighten them, don't. An ex-partner who has asked for no contact is an example. So is someone for whom your reappearance would reopen something painful. Your need to apologise doesn't outrank their peace. Likewise if the apology would mainly unload your guilt on to someone who was better off not knowing. In those cases the mending has to go somewhere else. You can do the equivalent

good for someone else. If you weren't there for a friend when it counted, be there for the next person who needs it. If you owe something that can't be repaid to the person, give it where it will help. This isn't a way of wiping the slate. It gives the guilt an action to point at.

And sometimes the person has died. People carry things they wish they'd said to a parent for decades. There's no apology to send. Some people find it helps to write the letter anyway and keep it, or to read it aloud somewhere that mattered to the two of you. I can't promise it will help you. I can say it's a different act from a replay. It gets done once and it has a last line.

If something on your list can be mended, put a date next to it now, before you read on. A date is a plan, and chapter 7 explained what a plan does.

The ones you can't

I've been using a small example on purpose, and it would be dishonest to leave it there. Some of what people replay isn't a clumsy sentence. It's a real loss that they had a hand in.

You let a good relationship go out of fear or pride, and they married someone else. You put your savings into something that failed. You spent your thirties in the wrong career and can't have them back. You were short-tempered with your mother in her last year because you were exhausted, and then she died. You weren't watching for one minute, and someone was hurt.

I won't tell you these don't matter or that you shouldn't regret them. Regret is the proper response to a real loss that you contributed to. A person who felt none would be strange. The aim of this chapter isn't to get you to feel fine about it.

What I'd like to do is separate two things that have got wound together, the regret and the replay.

Regret is a feeling about a fact. "I wish I'd been kinder to her that year." It's sad and true, and it may be with you for life. It tends to be quiet. It visits on anniversaries, when you hear a certain song or when you see a mother and daughter in a café. It doesn't demand anything. You feel it, and it passes, and it leaves you a bit more tender towards the people you still have.

The replay is an activity. It's the going back in, the re-arguing, the "if only I'd" repeated on a loop, the search for the version where it comes out differently. It isn't quiet. It has the flinch and the groan,

and it demands something impossible, which is a different ending.

As far as I can tell from how people describe it, the replay can get in the way of the regret. While you're busy re-running that last year and trying to edit it, you're not grieving your mother. You're arguing with the past, which is a way of not yet accepting that it happened. People sometimes find that when the replays ease off, what comes in their place is plain sadness. It can be strong at first. But sadness moves and changes over time, and replays don't.

Several of the earlier chapters apply with extra force to the large events.

Hindsight, from chapter 4, is at its most severe here. You now know she had a year left. You didn't then. You were tired, and you thought there was time, because there nearly always is. Ask what you knew then, and answer fairly.

The sample, from chapter 8, is at its most distorted. You remember the three times you snapped at her. You've lost the two hundred ordinary visits, the lifts to the hospital, and the evening you sat with her till she slept. She had all of it, the whole year, and I'd be surprised if the snapping was what she thought of when she thought of you.

And the question from chapter 9, about what can still be done, has answers even here. They're just not answers that change the past. You can't have your thirties again, but you can decide what the next ten years are for, using what the wrong career taught you about what you want. You can't be kinder to your mother, but there are

people alive now who'd benefit from the patience you wish you'd had. A loss that changes how you live has been put to some use. One that you only replay has been put to none.

One caution. If the event was violent, sudden or frightening, and it returns as vivid images, nightmares or a feeling of being back there, please reread the second caution in the preface. That's not a habit of thought to be reasoned with. It's a recognised condition that responds to proper treatment, and a GP is the place to start.

For the rest, the method in chapter 12 works on large events as well as small ones. It won't remove the regret, and I wouldn't want it to. It can give the event what the replays never have, a complete and fair account that you've written once and that has an end.

Telling it as someone else's story

Before the method, there's one technique that needs a chapter to itself, because the method depends on it.

You might fairly ask how a written account differs from a replay done on paper. If you sit down to write about the photocopier and end up back in the corridor with your face burning, you've only found a slower way to do the same thing.

What separates them is where you stand. Ethan Kross, Özlem Ayduk and Walter Mischel ran two experiments on this. They asked people to recall a time when someone had made them furious. Some were told to go back into the scene and see it through their own eyes again. Others were told to take a few steps back and watch it happen to themselves from a distance, as an observer might. Both groups were then asked to think about why they'd felt as they did. Those who went back in relived it, and their anger came up again. Those who stood back could think about their reasons without the feelings flooding in. The researchers saw this as the difference between working something through and brooding on it. Both groups had recalled the same event and asked themselves the same question. They had done it from different places.

Kross and a larger group of colleagues later found a simple way to get that distance, and it sounds too easy to work. Across seven studies with 585 people, they had some participants think about a stressful situation using "I" and others using their own name or "he" and "she". The studies involved making a good first impression

and giving a speech at short notice. The people who used their own names were less distressed. Observers rated them as having performed better. They also did less going over it afterwards, the post-event processing from chapter 5. Referring to yourself as you would to another person moved them to the observer's position.

Those experiments were about anger and social stress in the short term, and I'm carrying them over to old mistakes, so treat what follows as my application. But I find it persuasive, partly because it matches something everybody knows. You are far more sensible about other people's mistakes than about your own. If a friend told you the photocopier story about herself, you wouldn't think her a monster. You'd see the whole thing at once. She was young and nervous and wanted to be kind, and she grabbed the nearest phrase. It was a bad phrase, the colleague was tired, and nobody died of it. You'd say so in about four sentences, and you'd be right.

A replay never gets to that judgment, because a replay is first-person and close up. You're back in your own shoes in the corridor, and from there all you can see is her face.

So here's the photocopier told the other way. I've used "she" for the person who made the remark. Use whatever fits you, or your own name.

"She was twenty-nine and had been at the firm a year. A colleague she liked but didn't know well came back to work after her father's death. She met her by surprise at the photocopier and felt she had to say something. She hadn't prepared anything, and she had very little experience of bereavement. She said the first consoling thing that came into her head, which was a cliché and the wrong one.

The colleague said 'Yes' and left. She knew straight away it had been clumsy. She didn't follow it up because she was embarrassed. She has never done anything like it again."

All the facts are there, including the unflattering ones. She didn't follow it up, and she could have. But you can see the whole person, and the verdict comes easily. It was a clumsy moment from someone inexperienced who meant well, and it's long over.

Try it with one of yours, in your head, before you go on. Tell it in the third person, in the past tense, starting a little before the event so that the person's situation is in view. Give their age and say what they knew, what they wanted and what they did. Then ask what you'd say to that person if they were sitting across from you. Whatever that is, it's likely to be closer to the truth than anything you've arrived at on your own. It came from someone in a position to see.

The write-up

Here is the method. Each event gets gone through once, properly, on paper. I call it the write-up. It takes between twenty minutes and an hour. It replaces the replays in the sense that it does the jobs they were pretending to do.

I've put it on paper for two reasons. One is chapter 7, where a specific plan stopped the mind from raising an open item. The other is the research on writing. Joanne Frattaroli pooled 146 randomised studies in which people wrote about personal and meaningful matters, often upsetting ones, over a few short sessions. Overall it helped, across a range of health and psychological outcomes. I should tell you that the average effect was small. It's a modest help and I'm not offering it as a cure. But it's cheap, and it gives you something a replay never does, which is a finished object.

Do one event per sitting. Start with a small one. Use paper or a document that you'll keep. It has five headings.

What happened. Tell it as in chapter 11. Use the third person and the past tense, and start a little before the event. Be concrete. Say who was there, what was said and what was done, in order. Keep to the facts as a fair witness would give them. Don't write about what kind of person this makes you. Include what you did wrong, plainly, without softening it and without piling on. A few paragraphs is plenty.

What they knew then. This is chapter 4. List what the person in the story knew and didn't know at the time. Include their state, whether they were tired, frightened, young or under pressure. Include the facts that pointed the wrong way. You're making the case a fair-minded friend would make. You're not writing excuses.

What it cost, and to whom. Be honest in both directions. Don't wave away real harm, and don't inflate it. "She had an uncomfortable ten seconds on a hard day" is about right for the photocopier. For larger events this section will be longer and sadder, and it should be. It's where the regret from chapter 10 gets written down.

The lesson. Write one or two sentences that you could act on, with a plan attached in the form "when this, then that". "When I speak to someone who's grieving, then I'll say I'm sorry and ask how they are, and leave it there." If you can't find a lesson, because the decision was reasonable and turned out badly, then write that. "There's no lesson here beyond the fact that reasonable decisions sometimes go wrong."

What's left to do. This is chapter 9. Write either a specific act with a date, or the word "Nothing", with your reason. "Nothing. She left years ago, the harm was small, and contacting her now would be for my sake and not hers."

Then write a last line. "Written up on the 14th of June." Put the date on it and put it away somewhere you could find it.

Here's what the last three sections might look like for the photocopier, as an example.

"What it cost. She had an awkward moment on her first day back, one of several that week, I'd guess. I've had eleven years of wincing, which is far more than the event was worth. I've also avoided a few bereaved people since then when I could have been kind, and I regret that more than the remark.

"The lesson. When someone's grieving, then I say I'm sorry, ask how they're doing, and stop. And when someone at work has had bad news, I go and find them, because avoiding them was the worse mistake.

"What's left. Nothing, as far as she's concerned. But there's a man in accounts whose wife is ill, and I've been dodging him. I'll speak to him this week.

"Written up on the 14th of June."

The write-up found something the replays never did. The second lesson, about avoiding people, turned up once the event was looked at from outside and in the round. Four hundred replays missed it, because they were all spent staring at her face.

Here are a few practical points.

The write-up may be uncomfortable while you do it, and for a large event it may be upsetting. That's different from a replay. It's the discomfort of looking at the whole of something once, and it has an end. If you find yourself overwhelmed and unable to keep the observer's distance, stop. That's a sign the event may need more than a book, and working through it with a therapist would be a sensible choice.

Don't polish it. It's a record and nobody's going to mark it. When you've filled in the five headings and written the date, you're done.

Don't do them all at once. One a week is plenty. They're more tiring than they look.

Once it's written, there's one rule. The write-up is reopened only if new information arrives. If your colleague rings after eleven years, or you learn something about the flat sale that you never knew, take it out and add to it. Another replay isn't new information. It's the old material again, and the old material has been dealt with.

When it comes back

It will come back. A write-up doesn't erase a groove that's been worn for eleven years. Sometime in the following week you'll be at the washing line and the corridor will appear. That doesn't mean the method has failed. It's what you'd expect, and what matters is how you respond.

First, here's what doesn't work, since you've probably tried it. You can't order a thought out of your head. Daniel Wegner's experiments in the 1980s asked people not to think of a white bear. They thought of it more, and it rebounded afterwards. Telling yourself "stop thinking about the photocopier" is an instruction that contains the photocopier. It also turns each arrival into a failure, and that adds a second layer of misery to the first.

So you're not going to try to stop it arriving. You don't control that. What you can decide is whether to go in. The scene shows up, and that's an event in your head like any other. Then there's a small gap, and then the replay proper begins, with the walk down the corridor and the trying out of other lines. That gap is where you have a choice, and it gets wider with practice.

The response has three parts and takes about ten seconds.

You name it. "That's the photocopier." Use a plain label, in the tone you'd use for a bus going past. This does more than you'd think. It moves you a step outside the scene, to the observer's position from chapter 11.

You remind yourself of its status. "It's been written up. The lesson was to say I'm sorry and stop." The scene has been appearing all these years because it was filed as open, and you're telling your mind that it's closed and what the result was. Think of an email you've already answered turning up in your inbox a second time. You recognise it and leave it, and you don't write the reply again.

Then you put your attention on something outside your head. It needs to be specific and physical. You might notice the feel of the wet cotton, the pegs and the blackbird on the fence. Or you take up the actual problem of how to fit two more shirts on the line. The studies in chapter 3 showed that a few minutes with attention turned outward restored people's mood and their problem solving, while dwelling made both worse. The 2008 review reported that dozens of experiments show positive distraction relieving low mood. This isn't running away from the work, because the work is done and it's in the folder.

If it comes back thirty seconds later, do the same again, without irritation if you can manage it. Early on you may do this five or six times in one session at the washing line. Each time is a repetition of a new habit, and you're not making the old one any deeper.

It helps to know your idle moments. Replays arrive when your hands are busy and your mind is free. For a few weeks there's no shame in giving your mind something to hold at those times. Put the radio on in the kitchen or have a podcast at the washing line. In the shower, plan the day. This isn't for ever. It stops the old habit getting free rehearsal while the new one is still weak.

Bed is the hardest place, because it's dark and quiet and there's nothing to turn your attention to. The three parts still apply, with the last one adapted. Name it, remind yourself it's written up, and then give your mind a dull, concrete task. Go through the rooms of a house you used to live in, or the stops on a train line you know. If you lie there arguing with the replay, the replay wins, because arguing with it is going in.

One objection comes up. "This feels like dismissing something that matters." If you've done the write-up honestly, you haven't dismissed it. You've given it more careful attention than it ever got from the replays. What you're declining is the four-hundred-and-first pass through material you've fully examined. You can take something seriously and still be finished with it.

The decision

This chapter asks you to decide something. It comes late because I wanted the reasons in place first. If you'd begun here, the rule below would have felt like being told to stop caring, and it would have lasted a week.

The decision is this. **Each old mistake gets one write-up. After that, I don't go back in.**

Here's how to put it into practice.

Take the list from chapter 1 and add to it if more events have come to mind. Most people have between three and eight that come round regularly.

Begin with the smallest. Do its write-up this week. Do one a week after that, and leave the largest until you've had some practice.

Wherever the fifth heading names something to be done, give it a date and do it. If you've been putting off an apology for seven years, expect to want to put it off for another week. Send it anyway. It will be shorter and easier than the replays made it seem.

When an event comes back, use the three parts from chapter 13. Name it, remind yourself of its status, and turn your attention outward.

Then there are new mistakes, because you'll go on making them. The rule for a fresh one is different, since a fresh mistake does need thinking about. Give it two days. In those two days do

whatever needs doing, which may mean apologising or fixing something or owning up. If it's still coming round after that, do a write-up within the week. The aim is that nothing new joins the rotation. Without this, today's blunder could become the thing you'll be replaying eleven years from now.

Plans in the form "when this happens, then I'll do that" are well supported by research. Peter Gollwitzer and Paschal Sheeran pooled 94 tests and found they made people a good deal more likely to follow through. Here are three, and you can change the wording to suit yourself.

When an old scene turns up, then I'll say its name and "that's been written up".

When I notice I'm already halfway through a replay, then I'll finish the sentence I'm on, say "written up", and look at what my hands are doing.

When I make a new mistake that stings, then I'll do what needs doing within two days and write it up within the week.

The second of those matters, because you often won't catch a replay at the start. You'll find yourself in the corridor already. That's fine. Leaving halfway through counts, and so does leaving just before the ending.

Here's what to expect, and I'll be careful because I can't promise an outcome. In the first weeks the scenes will keep arriving about as often as before. What should change first is how long you stay. A ten-minute replay becomes two minutes and then twenty seconds, and eventually the scene is something that crosses your mind

without your going in. Over a few months, I'd expect the arrivals themselves to thin out for events that have been written up, and faster for ones where you've also mended something. Some will keep visiting for years, the large ones especially. A scene that visits briefly is something you can live with.

You'll have lapses. Some evening you'll be tired or low, and you'll spend forty minutes in the corridor as thoroughly as ever. That proves nothing about you or the method. Eleven years of habit doesn't vanish because you've read a book. Notice what set it off, since tiredness, drink and a bad day at work are the usual causes. Then carry on. You don't need to write anything up again. Nothing new happened.

Lastly, there are times when more than a book is needed. Please talk to a GP, or refer yourself to NHS talking therapies if you're in England, if any of these applies.

- You've had weeks of low mood, loss of interest, poor sleep or hopelessness. The NHS describes depression as symptoms that persist for weeks or months and interfere with work, social life and family life.
- The event was traumatic and returns as flashbacks, nightmares or vivid images.
- The thoughts are about harm you fear you've caused or might cause, and you're checking, confessing or mentally cancelling them out.
- The replaying takes up hours of most days despite your best efforts.

- You're having thoughts of harming yourself. Get help the same day, through NHS 111, an urgent GP appointment, or 999 in an emergency.

It may help to know that therapists treat this habit directly. Edward Watkins and colleagues have developed a form of cognitive behavioural therapy aimed specifically at rumination. It shares some ideas with this book, such as the shift from abstract "why" thinking to concrete thinking. In a trial with 42 people whose depression hadn't responded to medication, adding this therapy to their usual care improved their symptoms and remission rates, and the improvement went along with a reduction in rumination. It was a small trial and had no comparison therapy, as the authors say themselves. But it shows that the habit is known to clinicians and that it can be worked on with them.

The washing line again

Here's the scene from chapter 1 again, some months on. It's an example of how it might go, and I'm not promising it.

It's Sunday, late afternoon, and you're hanging out washing. Your hands know the job and your mind is free, and into the free space comes the photocopier, with the corridor and her coming towards you.

"That's the photocopier," you think. "It's written up. Say sorry and stop, and don't dodge people."

The scene hangs there a moment, as if waiting to see whether you mean it. You look at what's in your hands. It's a pillowcase, inside out. You turn it the right way and peg it. There's a blackbird making a racket on the fence. You wonder if there's enough line left for the sheets, and there isn't, so you fold one double.

By the time that's solved, the corridor has gone. You didn't push it out. There was nothing for it to do. You hadn't left anything open for it.

You may also remember the man in accounts. You did speak to him, the week you wrote it up. You said you were sorry to hear his wife was ill and asked how he was managing. He talked for ten minutes. At the end he thanked you, and said most people had been avoiding him. The photocopier had been costing other people something all those years, and that stopped the week you looked at the whole of it once.

It won't always go this cleanly. There will be evenings when an old scene gets you, and one or two of the large events will always be able to make you sad. That's as it should be. A person with a past and a conscience will feel it sometimes. What you can stop is the repetition, the hundreds of trips back into a room where everything has already happened.

The event took eight seconds and ended eleven years ago. You learned what it had to teach within a day. Whatever you owed for it, you've paid many times over, and the payments never reached anyone. It's already over, and it was already over the first time you replayed it.

If you do one thing after closing this book, take the smallest event on your list and write it up this week, under five headings, in the third person, with a date at the bottom. Then go and hang out the washing.

Notes

This book gives general information. It isn't medical or psychological advice, and it's no substitute for a doctor or therapist who knows your situation.

I've kept sources out of the chapters where I could so they read easily. Here they are by chapter, with the limits I'm aware of. Unless I say otherwise, I read the published summary of each paper and not the full text. I checked each paper for a retraction notice in September 2026 and found none. Where a chapter isn't listed, it rests on my own reasoning. That includes chapters 1, 9, 10 and 15, the list of costs in chapter 8, and the method in chapters 12 to 14. The NHS pages were read in September 2026. They're written for England or the UK, and services differ elsewhere. Much of the research on rumination was done with students in the United States, often with people who were in a low mood, and most of it concerns dwelling on mood and problems in general. Applying it to the replaying of one particular old mistake is my step throughout.

Before you start. The descriptions are from the NHS pages "Symptoms, depression in adults", "PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder)" and "Symptoms, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD)".

Chapter 2. Lyubomirsky and Nolen-Hoeksema, "Self-perpetuating properties of dysphoric rumination", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 65, 1993, pages 339 to 349. Two laboratory studies and two questionnaire studies. The sense of insight appeared in people who were already in a low mood and were asked to ruminate. Papageorgiou and Wells, "Positive beliefs about

depressive rumination: development and preliminary validation of a self-report scale", Behavior Therapy 32, 2001, pages 13 to 26, and "A clinical metacognitive model of rumination and depression", Cognitive Therapy and Research 27, 2003, pages 261 to 273. I couldn't obtain the summaries of these two papers. My description of the model follows the account given in Petrošaneć, Brekalo and Nakić Radoš, Psychology and Psychotherapy 95, 2022, pages 838 to 852. The list of five jobs is mine.

Chapter 3. Epstude and Roese, "The functional theory of counterfactual thinking", Personality and Social Psychology Review 12, 2008, pages 168 to 192. Watkins and Moulds, "Distinct modes of ruminative self-focus: impact of abstract versus concrete rumination on problem solving in depression", Emotion 5, 2005, pages 319 to 328. The benefit of concrete thinking was found in the depressed patients. Lyubomirsky and Nolen-Hoeksema, "Effects of self-focused rumination on negative thinking and interpersonal problem solving", Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 69, 1995, pages 176 to 190. Three studies. The effects were found in participants who were already in a low mood.

Chapter 4. Roese and Vohs, "Hindsight bias", Perspectives on Psychological Science 7, 2012, pages 411 to 426. The example of the flat and the question "What did I know then?" are mine. The authors report that considering alternative explanations for an outcome reduces the bias, which is the nearest support for the question.

Chapter 5. Savitsky, Epley and Gilovich, "Do others judge us as harshly as we think? Overestimating the impact of our failures, shortcomings, and mishaps", Journal of Personality and Social

Psychology 81, 2001, pages 44 to 56. Flynn and Yoon, "Post-event processing in social anxiety: a scoping review", Journal of Anxiety Disorders 109, 2025, article 102947. That research concerns the hours and days after a social event in people with social anxiety. Extending it to an event eleven years old, and the suggestion that each replay darkens the memory, are my reading. What I say about the colleague's likely view is a guess.

Chapter 6. The research on guilt and repair is reviewed in Tangney, Stuewig and Mashek, "Moral emotions and moral behavior", Annual Review of Psychology 58, 2007, pages 345 to 372. Breines and Chen, "Self-compassion increases self-improvement motivation", Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin 38, 2012, pages 1133 to 1143. Four experiments. Davis and eight colleagues, "Forgiving the self and physical and mental health correlates: a meta-analytic review", Journal of Counseling Psychology 62, 2015, pages 329 to 335. The figure is a correlation of .45 across 65 samples and 17,939 people.

Chapter 7. Masicampo and Baumeister, "Consider it done! Plan making can eliminate the cognitive effects of unfulfilled goals", Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 101, 2011, pages 667 to 683. Their goals were tasks set in a laboratory. Treating an old mistake as an open item of the same kind is my interpretation and hasn't been tested.

Chapter 8. Nolen-Hoeksema, Wisco and Lyubomirsky, "Rethinking rumination", Perspectives on Psychological Science 3, 2008, pages 400 to 424. Nolen-Hoeksema, Morrow and Fredrickson, "Response styles and the duration of episodes of depressed mood", Journal of

Abnormal Psychology 102, 1993, pages 20 to 28. The review also notes that in surveys, as opposed to experiments, a habit of distraction hasn't reliably gone with lower depression.

Chapter 11. Kross, Ayduk and Mischel, "When asking 'why' does not hurt: distinguishing rumination from reflective processing of negative emotions", Psychological Science 16, 2005, pages 709 to 715. Kross and eight colleagues, "Self-talk as a regulatory mechanism: how you do it matters", Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 106, 2014, pages 304 to 324.

Chapter 12. Frattaroli, "Experimental disclosure and its moderators: a meta-analysis", Psychological Bulletin 132, 2006, pages 823 to 865. The average effect across 146 randomised studies was $r = .075$, which is small. Those studies used free writing about feelings over several sessions. The five headings are my own structure and haven't been tested.

Chapter 13. Wegner, Schneider, Carter and White, "Paradoxical effects of thought suppression", Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 53, 1987, pages 5 to 13. Later reviews put the rebound effect at small to moderate. The three-part response is mine.

Chapter 14. Gollwitzer and Sheeran, "Implementation intentions and goal achievement: a meta-analysis of effects and processes", Advances in Experimental Social Psychology 38, 2006, pages 69 to 119. Watkins and seven colleagues, "Rumination-focused cognitive-behavioural therapy for residual depression: phase II randomised controlled trial", British Journal of Psychiatry 199, 2011, pages 317

to 322. What I say to expect is my expectation and not a finding.
The advice on when to seek help draws on the NHS pages named
above and on "Talking therapies".