

A Legend in the Study of Rumination

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Ed Watkins, University of Exeter, United Kingdom, cites Susan Nolen-Hoeksema's influential theory that rumination perpetuates the symptoms of depression.

Susan Nolen-Hoeksema of Yale University, a pioneer in the field of rumination, died in January at the age of 53 following heart surgery. A half dozen speakers — many of them scientific and academic protégés, and many of them choking up at times — gathered at the 25th APS Annual Convention to remember her life and work. Her husband, Richard, was on hand to receive the James McKeen Cattell Fellow Award on her behalf.

“Susan would be highly honored to receive this award,” he said in a statement. “She has held high regard for APS since its beginning in 1988. She felt it was her home to discuss her science.”



Katie A. McLaughlin, Harvard University, worked with Nolen-Hoeksema on identifying the social origins of rumination.

Ed Watkins of the University of Exeter in the United Kingdom offered an overview of Nolen-

Hoeksema's research legacy, centering on a highly influential 1991 paper in the *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*. In that work, Nolen-Hoeksema laid out her theory that rumination (compared to distraction) perpetuated symptoms of depression. An explosion of citations followed that paper, said Watkins, and today more than 8,000 related works are published annually.

Nolen-Hoeksema also led the study of gender differences in depression. Twice as many women as men tend to be depressed, and Nolen-Hoeksema believed one reason for this disparity could be women's tendency to ruminate. She wrote popular books on the topic — most notably the 2003 *Women Who Think Too Much: How to Break Free of Overthinking and Reclaim Your Life* — so her research could improve the lives of others.

"Susan was first in research, first in teaching, and first in the hearts of her peers and students," said Watkins, paraphrasing Henry Lee, who famously eulogized George Washington in similar words.

Four of Nolen-Hoeksema's former students offered brief discussions of their research directions and their memories of a wonderful mentor who departed too soon.

Katie A. McLaughlin of Harvard University had worked closely with Nolen-Hoeksema on identifying the social origins of rumination. They'd found early signs that exposure to stressful events increased the likelihood of engaging in rumination.



Blair E. Wisco, Yale University, worked closely with her mentor on the question of whether or not some rumination could be beneficial.

McLaughlin described one recently completed study involving a group of teenagers participating in a sham online social interaction designed to produce feelings of acceptance or rejection. The rejected group felt a great deal of stress and negative affect. Afterward, this group of adolescents reported ruminating on the event much more than controls or the accepted group.



James J. Gross, Stanford University, says Nolen-Hoeksema excelled as a scientist and teacher, and as a “soccer mom” devoted to family.

Lori M. Hilt of Lawrence University described her studies of the idea that perhaps some people ruminate because they have poor cognitive control. This line of research builds off one that Nolen-Hoeksema established several years back. In a study published in 2000, Nolen-Hoeksema found that people who tended to ruminate on their problems also had difficulty with a cognitive control task called the Wisconsin Card Sort — a game with ever-changing internal rules that requires quick adaptation.

Hilt spoke with awe about the breadth of Nolen-Hoeksema’s research. “I’ve tried to think why and how it’s possible that Susan could be so good at so many things,” she said. “There must have been more than 24 hours in Susan’s day.”



Susan’s husband, Richard Nolen-Hoeksema, accepted her James McKeen Cattell Fellow Award on her behalf.

Blair E. Wisco of Yale University worked closely with her mentor on the question of whether or not some forms of rumination could actually be beneficial. They focused on the notion that it can be psychologically healthy to gain some distance from events. In a study that involved some participants with depressive symptoms, they asked various groups to recall a sad event either from a distant (or third-person) perspective or an immersed (highly personal) one. They found that getting distance reduced the emotional intensity of the sad memories, even in people with depressive symptoms.

Amelia Aldao of The Ohio State University, whose work also focuses on various approaches to emotion

regulation, expressed what many of Nolen-Hoeksema's students and colleagues no doubt were also experiencing. On the one hand, she said, she felt very grateful at having had the chance to learn from her mentor for several formative years. On the other hand, she also had feelings of sadness and anger that such an important person was gone.

"That's what happens when people are so unbelievably amazing," Aldao said. "They generate this very complex set of feelings in us."

Summarizing the discussions, James J. Gross of Stanford University said three sides of Nolen-Hoeksema had emerged, each worthy of celebration. There was "Susan the scientist," a true trailblazer of emotion research; "Susan the teacher," whose impact as a mentor was written on the faces of her students; and "Susan the person," a passionate soccer mom with a great devotion to family.

"I think it's in full awareness that we'll miss her terribly, but that we're carrying some of her remarkable energy forward with us in the way we do science and teach others to do science," Gross said.

References

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