

# **SOCIAL COGNITION (Part 9)**

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## **CONTROLLED SOCIAL COGNITION**

### **Counterfactual Thinking**

Counterfactual thinking is thinking about a past that did not happen. This often happens in 'if only...' situations, where we wish something had or had not happened. This can be so powerful we can change our own memories, adjusting the facts and creating new memories. It can happen to cover up trauma or may be just excuses to avoid facing uncomfortable truths. It can also be to explain what is otherwise unexplainable. This effect is increased by:

- Replication: if we can easily reconstruct events as happened or as wished for.
- Closeness: if the unwanted event is close, such as just missing winning the lottery by one number or just missing a taxi.
- Exception: if the event occurred because of a non-routine action that might well not have happened ('if only...').
- Controllability: if something could have been done to avoid the event.
- Action: in the short term, we regret actions that cause problems more than inaction that might have the same effect (although in the longer term, this effect is reversed).

We can also do the reverse, thinking about bad things that did not happen, such as when we narrowly avoid being in an accident. Counterfactual thinking often happens around situations of perceived 'luck'.