



Psychological Rumination

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WHAT IS IT?

Have you ever had a puncture and been unable to get on your way? The thinking process you go through at that point is called rumination – thinking about a problem over and over until it is solved, and the likelihood of it happening again (or you being inconvenienced) is reduced - for example, you resolve to join a roadside rescue service and to ensure you have everything with you to fix the problem next time.

Generally speaking for most of us rumination is a very helpful process. In fact, it is fundamental to what makes us human: the capacity to do thought experiments and think through possible scenarios in our minds.

However, on occasion this can go wrong: the puncture becomes not just a logistical problem, but it becomes our fault. We are to blame. We are stupid. At times like these, the thinking process morphs from problem-solving (“where’s the jack?”) to questions (“If only....”). Negative emotions of guilt or shame, anger or sadness, maybe anxiety, can begin to surface.

If temporary, this is again a helpful process and also helps us to develop socially: we are less likely to do problematic things if those things bring up troubling emotions.

IT'S BECOME A PROBLEM IF YOU'RE...

- Thinking about a past event or a possible future event repeatedly, and for extended periods of time.
- Often using questions like “Why Me?”, “What if...?” or “If only....?”. Also, repeating scenarios visually or verbally in your mind's eye of what and how you are going to say the right thing, tell someone off, get your own back....
- Becoming distressed by the thinking process.
- Distress lingering beyond the repeated thinking, and becoming like a symptom of (for example) depression or anxiety.
- Day-to-day functioning is disrupted because the emotions are so intense as to become incapacitating, or because significant amounts of time are spent in a rumination cycle resulting in being late or delaying activities.

HOW CAN IT BECOME UNHEALTHY OR DESTRUCTIVE?

Problems emerge if the rumination becomes enduring, linked to troubling emotions such as sadness or anxiety, and cannot be easily resolved. For example, there is no resolution to the thought “if only I had been driving slower I would have seen the pothole..... the other car..... the child...”.

This infinite thinking loop accompanied by problematic emotions can then lead to enduring problematic emotions which then become labelled as mental ill health conditions.

WHAT CAN I DO TO REDUCE OR ELIMINATE IT?

There are a range of approaches that focus less on emotion and more on the thinking style of rumination. As that is tackled the feedback loop generating the enduring emotion is weakened and the client improves in their mood. They also learn how to manage their thoughts so they don't fall into the same trap again.

The first step is to become more adept at noticing rumination thoughts. Often people report being surprised how often and for how long they are ruminating.

Once adept at noticing the ruminative cycle there are several options, some of which are counter-intuitive:

Express gratitude to the rumination and to be kind to it.

The thoughts are, after all, doing what you need: to be alerted to potential danger or threat, and to get you to think through how to stop that. 'Thank' the thought and see if the process has anything new to tell you. If not then calmly and gently move your attention to something else, for example what you were trying to do before the rumination started.

Notice the thought and then again, kindly and gently, redirect your attention to another activity.

Don't try to stop the thought (no one can). Instead, accept it is there and notice as it goes through your mind to be replaced by another thought.

Start a simple task that will disrupt the thought.

It could be a puzzle like Sudoku or Tetris, or talking to a friend, or reading a magazine.

Breath and relax your muscles.

Problematic rumination will tend to make you distressed, usually anxious - this can counter it.

Use simple grounding techniques.

If the rumination feels very real, almost as if it is actually happening then simple grounding techniques can be helpful - noticing your immediate surroundings, reminding yourself where you are, moving from one spot to another, feeling the chair you are sitting in through your body and reminding yourself that, in the moment, you are safe.

WANT TO GO DEEPER?

We can run a session with you on Working Through Rumination. You can explore it and make an enquiry here:

www.thrive-worldwide.org/service/working-through-rumination/

Alternatively, there are a range of excellent self help books available:

- Rumination: Learn to Overcome Your Destructive Thoughts and Start Thinking Positively (Fight Anxiety and Stress) by Lana Otoy.
- Rumination-Focused Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy for Depression by Edward R. Watkins