

Reeling in Rumination

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What is rumination? It involves continuously thinking about the same pessimistic and negative thoughts over and over again. A habit of rumination can be exhausting because it can lead to depression as well as impair your ability to think clearly and be able to regulate your negative emotions. It also may cause you to feel isolated and often has the unforeseen consequence of pushing away the people you care about (Spradlin, 2002).

What causes rumination? People ruminate for a variety of reasons. According to the American Psychiatric Association (2013), some common factors leading to rumination include: (1) experiencing ongoing stressors that you cannot control, (2) undergoing or having a history of emotional or physical trauma, and (3) believing that obsessive thinking will protect you from the life problems you have encountered.

Rumination is also common among people who possess certain dispositional characteristics, which include perfectionism, anxiety, and an excessive questioning of one's relationships with others (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Moreover, these people might have a tendency to either overvalue or undervalue their relationships with those they care about in such a manner that they remain in an ongoing state of disequilibrium.

Once you get stuck in a ruminating thought cycle, it can be very difficult to get out of it. If you do enter a cycle of repetitive thoughts, it is important to stop them as quickly as possible to prevent them from becoming more intense. Just as when a ball is rolling downhill, it is easier to stop the ruminating thoughts when they first start rolling and have less speed than when they have gathered more momentum over time.

So, what can you do to reel in these obsessive thoughts from overtaking your mind? Here are ten strategies to try when you begin to experience the same thought, or set of thoughts, swirling around in the cyclotron of your head:

1. Distract Yourself

When you realize you are starting to ruminate, finding a distraction that can break your thought cycle (Boyd, 2021). Look around you, quickly choose something else to do, and try not to give it more thought. In addition, consider calling a friend or family member, doing house chores, watching a movie, reading a book, and taking a walk or running on your favorite path.

2. Plan to Take Action

Instead of repeating the same negative thought over and over again, take that thought and make a plan to take action to address it. In your head, outline each step you need to take to address the problem, or write it down on a piece of paper. Be as specific as

possible and also realistic with your expectations. Doing this can help disrupt your rumination. It will also help you move forward in the attempt to get a negative thought out of your head.

3. Take Action

Once you've outlined a plan of action to address your ruminating thoughts, take one small step to address the issue. Refer to the plan you made to solve the problem you have been obsessing over. Move forward with each step slowly and incrementally until your mind is put at ease.

4. Question Your Thoughts

We often ruminate when we think we have made a major mistake or when something traumatic has happened to us. If you start ruminating on a troubling thought, try putting your repetitive thought in perspective. Thinking more about the possible inaccuracy of your troubling thoughts might help you stop ruminating because you realize they make little actual sense (Spradlin, 2002).

5. Readjust Your Life's Goals

Perfectionism and unrealistic goal setting can lead to rumination (Spradlin, 2002). If you set goals that are unrealistic, you may start to focus on why and how you have not reached a goal, or what you should have done to reach it. Setting more realistic goals that you are capable of achieving can reduce the risks of overthinking your own actions.

6. Work on Enhancing Your Self-esteem

Many people who ruminate report difficulties with self-esteem. In fact, lack of self-esteem can be associated with increased rumination and also has been linked with increased risk of depression (McKay & Fanning, 2000). Enhancement of self-esteem can be accomplished in many ways. For instance, building on existing strengths can add to a sense of mastery, which can enhance self-esteem. Also focusing on gratitude and the things about your life for which you feel thankful can enhance your sense of well-being (DeSteno, Buemann, Bartlett, & Williamson (2010).

7. Try Meditation

Meditating can reduce rumination because it involves clearing your mind to arrive at an emotionally calm state. When you find yourself with a repeating loop of thoughts in your mind, seek out a quiet space. Sit down, breathe deeply, and focus on nothing but breathing (Levey & Levey, 1999).

8. Understand Your Triggers

Each time you find yourself ruminating, make a mental note of the situation you are in. This includes where you are, what time of day it is, who's around you (if anyone), and what you have been doing that day. Developing ways to avoid or manage these triggers can reduce your rumination (Spradlin, 2002).

9. Talk to a Friend

Ruminating thoughts can make you feel isolated. Talking about your thoughts with a friend who can offer an outside perspective may help break the cycle. Be sure to speak with a friend who can give you that perspective rather than just ruminate with you.

10. Make Lifestyle Changes

If you are a long-time ruminator who wants to bring an end to your obsessive negative thoughts, consider some simple changes you can make in your life that can help do just that, including:

- Being proactive in trying to solve your problems. Identify problems in your life and then start taking actions to solve those problems, one step at a time.
- Setting your own expectations. Negative ruminating thoughts can creep in when you question your own self-worth. Be sure to praise yourself for your successes and forgive yourself for your mistakes. Constantly work on building your self-esteem by taking care of yourself and doing things you enjoy and excel at.
- Creating a support system. Having friends and family members, and even a therapist, any of whom you can call on for help when something goes wrong or when you're having a bad day, are vital to your well being. These special people may distract you from your ruminating thoughts and are also likely to boost your self-esteem.

In conclusion, rumination can and needs to be managed. A key part of this management strategy is to stop your rumination thought cycle in its tracks before it spirals out of control. It is also imperative to be proactive and be able to take steps to prevent yourself from ruminating in the first place. With awareness and some lifestyle changes, it is possible to free yourself from obsessiveness and preoccupation (Boyes, 2021).

References

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