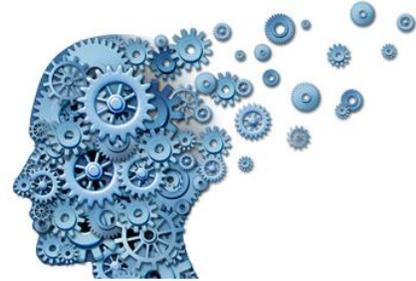


Letting go of ruminations

Do you constantly replay or obsess over past situations trying to analyze and figure out what went wrong? Do you overthink about your own perceived flaws, regrets or obsess about the wrongdoings of others? This is known as rumination, where our mind keeps replaying what led to that horrific incident! Those are stories we repeat to ourselves based on interpretations, judgments and assumptions about events that amplify our emotional reactions in an unhelpful way to hinder effective problem-solving. We replay the problematic situations and conclusions in our mind without coming up with a viable solution, infused with a sense of helplessness.



Thinking and analyzing are ways of trying to understand, to attain a sense of mastery or a feeling of control when you feel trammelled, helpless or victimized. You feel that if you go over the story of “why” or “what should or should not have been” one more time you will find another way of seeing this that will feel better. However, this does not happen. We ruminate over it, again and again, making ourselves feel terrible in the process without coming up with a better perspective or a viable solution. To figure exactly why we or other people react or feel in a certain way is very complex and there are no black and white answers.

Reflecting on past experiences can be helpful in problem-solving and overcoming dilemmas, but excessive rumination takes this to the next level. It offers few new insights and often serves to intensify negative feelings. We can become narrowly focused on the things that are not going well instead of seeing the larger picture. These ruminative thoughts can keep us awake late at night over-thinking the situation. Research is showing that rumination cause depression, anxiety, PTSD, chronic pain, insomnia, binge eating and substance use.

Rumination is a way of thinking where one compulsively focusses on symptoms, causes and consequences of one's distress, as opposed to its solutions. Every time we ruminate, it affects the chemistry of the brain, depleting the “good feeling chemistry”. So as soon as we realize that our mind is ruminating, we can try to stop, to stand back, to pull away from the thoughts, to become the wise observer, and to re-focus, to recognize that thoughts are just thoughts, “thoughts are not facts” and we can choose to think differently, in a more helpful, solution-focused way.

Initially, you may discover that the habit of ruminating is strong. Remember ruminations are part of your default mode so they keep coming back, again and again, so we need to use strategies again and again until the ruminations become less intense. You may have been ruminating on something a hundred times, so you may need to make a conscious effort to pull away a hundred times. The good news is that the more you pull away from the ruminations, the easier it gets. We re-wire our brain each time we take our attention away from the rumination, each time we disengaged intentionally. The aim is to divert our attention to something that is more helpful for two minutes or more, each time. It takes time and persistence to re-wire the circuits in our brain, to change our default mode, but it is so worth it! Here are many ways that have been found to be helpful in re-focusing our mind toward more helpful

thinking. Practice one strategy at the time. There are many options so select the one that is most effective for you.

The first step is to become aware: catching the moment when you are ruminating. Identify the thought, the judgment, the story that are causing unpleasant feelings.

Stopping and asking about your thought, belief or story: Is it true? Is it helpful? Is it kind? Is it pointing to a solution? If the answer is “no” then it is an unhelpful thought or story. If it keeps coming back in your mind again and again then it is a rumination. Here are many strategies you could choose:

1. Become aware of the thoughts or story, pause/stop, stand back, observe the thoughts
2. Create a space of awareness in the moment:
 - Breathe out, a long exhale
 - Feel your feet touch the ground
3. Identify the thought or emotion using the labelling techniques: “this is an unhelpful rumination which is causing undue anxiety” or “sadness” or “anger”. Continue labelling for a specific emotion such as: “this is anxiety”, “this is what the experience of anxiety feels like”. In this way, we can start stepping out of the feelings, by labelling and observing in this way.
4. Explore how this emotion is expressed in the body. Identify the area of tightness, of tension, of discomfort. Attending to yourselves with kindness. Maybe put your hand over that area saying: “softening” or “warming” or saying: “I care about you”, “May I give myself the kindness that I need”
5. Remembering saying: “I am more than this emotions... I can deal with this”
6. Using a variety of ways to attend to yourself and your needs
7. Wishing yourself and others well, saying something like: “May you find peace, may I find peace”, “may you be happy, may I be happy”, “may there be harmony”, “may my struggle ease” repeating in your mind whatever resonates with you to ease the struggle. Repeating a good wish for yourself that is encouraging and inspires a positive outcome.
8. You may also be taking this more personally than it needs to be. Maybe this situation is not so much about you but more about the struggles of somebody else. You may be blaming yourself or someone else unduly! We all make mistakes. This is the human condition and can’t be avoided. That is because every thoughts and action are the product of a universe of causes and conditions stretching back through time. You are not your fault, but you are still responsible!
9. Acknowledging your own feelings of pain, struggle, and difficulties “Ouch! This is hard! It hurts! I am suffering and others also are suffering. I am not alone!
10. Recognize that as a human being we all suffer, we all encounter challenges and difficult moment... there are others in the world who have similar feelings and live through a difficult situation similar to this.... Having compassion for us all who suffer....
11. Talk to yourself, like a good friend would talk to you, being supportive and encouraging. What would you say to a friend you care about who is going through a similar situation? Can you say that to yourself?
12. Think of someone you love. Imagine yourself hugging them or them hugging you, and for your loved one to be saying something comforting to you.

13. If tearful... accept the emotion, letting it come and go on its own... pausing for a moment, taking a long exhale, feeling your feet on the ground, being with it gently, saying "I release" as you breathe out... exhale. Attending to yourself like rubbing your hand or upper arms in a way that makes you feel cared for and comforted. Labelling the emotion: "This is grief" or "this is sadness" then identifying it in your body and staying with it like you would for a good friend.
14. Accepting yourself warts and all, befriending yourself as a human being. Like all of us you are "being imperfectly perfect!"
15. If you are ruminating over some mistakes that you have made, you can look for the lesson to be learned. Asking yourself: "what can I learn from this?" "what would I do next time?" And in your mind replay the scenario of how you want to react in the future. Re-playing in your mind how you wish to respond in a positive and constructive way is going to enable you to handle future similar situations more effectively in accordance with your desired outcome.
16. Remind yourself of your strengths and your positives
17. Think of something you did well recently or some situation that went well for you
18. Go for a mindful walk. A change of scenery can help us to gain a new perspective.
19. Exercise or go for a bike ride. Moving your body can move the content in your head. Notice aspects of nature or humanity that are larger than your conundrum. Try to focus on what is outside of you rather than inside of you.
20. Sorting out what you can and can't change in a situation. Remember we can't control others or situations in our lives, but we can control how we see and react to them
21. Engage in some mindfulness practice to allow your creative thoughts to emerge.
22. Distract yourself with books, movies, magazines, museums, a busy street, interesting activities or hobbies. Focus on something else, even if you don't feel like it. Once you are involved your mind has a chance to take another path.
23. Repeat something helpful like: "May I be able to accept the things I cannot change; the courage to change the things I can and wisdom to know the difference."
24. Repeat a comforting phrase, an affirmation, a prayer, a poem or a song to yourself.
25. If you are "catastrophizing" or "awfulizing," think of all the times you were sure a horror would happen and it didn't. Turning a hysterical assumption into an objective assessment can take away the pain and calm you. Write down what you fear, the worst thing that can happen, and then write down three more positive outcomes. Try to figure out what is most realistic.
26. Listen to music that has meaning for you, that provides comfort. Playing a song from your childhood or current times. Get swept up. Sing, dance or clean the car with the radio blasting Rolling Stones. Whatever.
27. Listen to radio programs or podcast that tell compelling stories about people who have undergone unusual struggles and triumphs. Watch a comedy.
28. Make arrangements to meet a good friend who can be relied upon to have a sensitive response or to make you laugh.
29. Re-write the narrative. Write the story as you see it. Then once you do that write what a good supportive friend would say or what you would say to a friend to comfort them.
30. You can also write the story or rumination changing the pronoun by taking the "I" replacing it by using your name or re-telling the story as if it was someone else story. Converting the "I" into

“she” or “he”, telling the story in the third person. Then adding what you would do to this person as a good friend to support them.

31. Can you see the sense of humour and can you make light of some events in it?
32. Become active: cook, scrub, fix, run, go somewhere and be around other people. Take on a small project
33. Think about someone you know who is also struggling and feel compassion for them. Call them or send them a message. Be helpful to someone else
34. Direct your attention towards the positives, being grateful for the good things in your life. We learn from both the positives and negatives. You can decide to think about something good that has recently happened to you or something that you are looking forward to in the future. Focusing on the practice of being grateful for what is already in your life for more than 20 seconds... counting your blessings. Remember even if you can't find anything to be grateful about, just asking the question “What am I grateful for?” is enough to change the chemistry in your brain.
35. Take time each day to write down three things that were really great or happy about your day or what went well or what you did or someone else did well. Take the time to share these “wins” with loved ones. You can also ask them to participate and start to have more positive conversations.
36. Focus on the big picture, on what you want, on your values and desired outcome while also focussing on the specific actions that are required to get you there.

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This advice is of a general nature only and does not take into account particular conditions. For further assistance contact a psychologist.

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