

# How to Stop RUMINATION

## During Stressful Times

by

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Similar to the positive, physiological impact of guided imagery — which our BCPVPA members may remember from the ReFresh series last Fall — when you ruminate, your brain believes you are actually experiencing or reliving what you are thinking about. Rumination can negatively impact your emotions, mood, physiology (heart rate or tension), and behaviours.

Crisis & Trauma Resource Institute (CTRI) Trainer, **Tom Walker**, introduces some strategies for shutting down rumination.

As someone who struggles with depression and anxiety due to PTSD and other life experiences, I know how easy it is to get caught up in rumination. As a trainer, therapist, employee, husband, and father, rumination has brought me more pain than it has ever alleviated. In this blog, I want to give you some ideas on how to disrupt repetitive thoughts.

Rumination occurs when our primary focus is on negative things that are happening in our lives. The focus is on the distress rather than looking for possible solutions. For example:

- ***“I’m going to get sick.”***
- ***“I’m going to get my family member sick.”***
- ***“I will be helpless if I get sick.”***
- ***“I will not be strong enough to get through this.”***

The process of rumination changes our stress response. We can become much more reactive to stress, and that can lead us to an increase in both anxiety and depression. Additionally, if you have the tendency to ruminate like I do, understanding its downsides is essential. Remember, if we are overthinking something, our brain thinks it’s a problem and reacts accordingly. Rumination predicts a heightened stress response in those who are already anxious and/or depressed.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, some somatic symptoms have been more prevalent than others. These can include, but are not limited to:

- Headaches
- Neck tension



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***Without intentionally trying to disrupt rumination, your brain will remain focused on the negatives, which only leads to further stress and anxiety.***

- Gastrointestinal problems
- Difficulty sleeping
- Lack of appetite

All of these somatic symptoms can lead to low energy levels and fatigue. If we focus on our depression and our struggles, we are more likely to remain depressed and anxious. Anxiety and depression often coexist, but research shows that anxiety usually comes first and can be the impetus for depression.

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Rumination increases activity in the part of the brain that controls learning, memory, and affect. This can cause a kind of *learned helplessness*, or what Psychologist Martin Seligman calls “our default.” When rumination occurs consistently, we often get stuck in the thinking pattern. As a result, it becomes easier to remain in a stressed, hopeless, and helpless state.

# HERE ARE SEVEN IDEAS FOR SHUTTING DOWN RUMINATION:

## **1. Talk to yourself rather than listen.**

When negative things are happening in your head, change them by saying, “I can do this,” rather than listening to your thoughts that might be saying, “You’re going to screw this up.”

## **2. Go on an attention diet.**

Pick credible sources from which to get news and information. Once or twice a day, listen up and learn what is happening, then shut it down.

## **3. Practice gratitude daily.**

Research shows that using gratitude as an exercise before going to bed can help us shut down the negative thinking that can occur during times like these.

## **4. Be assertive.**

During COVID-19, being assertive can be a matter of staying well or getting ill. If people are breaking the rules around social distancing, it’s okay to calmly say, “I’m not comfortable with how close you are; let’s agree to keep social distancing!”

## **5. Focus on what you can control.**

We can control how careful we are by doing what reliable sources recommend we do to stay safe. We

can be intentional about social distancing, washing our hands, not touching our face, wearing a mask, etc.

## **6. Move your body.**

Ensure that your schedule includes some form of exercise. It can be intense physical exercise, or things like walking, hiking, or enjoying the outdoors.

## **7. Practice bracketing.**

Bracketing is a useful tool if you are struggling with overthinking a problem and need to focus on an unrelated task. It involves setting aside a specific time to think about what you’re concerned about, such as an argument you had with someone, a mistake you made at work, or a stressful call from family.

Practice bracketing by scheduling a time to address the problem. Any time it comes back into your mind, say, “I have scheduled a time to think about this. I am going to work through that later today or tomorrow, so I do not need to think about it now.”

Without intentionally trying to disrupt rumination, your brain will remain focused on the negatives, which only leads to further stress and anxiety. Using the above strategies or an approach you’ve worked out yourself will help you regulate, shift, and break the pattern of negative thinking. When this happens, the brain changes, and it is less likely that you will engage in rumination in the future.

**If you are not able to stop the rumination with these tips,  
you may need more support.**

**Reach out to your physician, or a counsellor for support in  
breaking the pattern of negative thinking.**