

January 2021 Issue: Week Three

The Dangers of Getting Stuck in Rumination

Complete this month's lead-o-meter.

A few weeks ago, we discussed how rumination in moderation can be effective, and help us focus on *how* to solve a problem. We also learned that excessive rumination can be ineffective and challenging to our health, as it often focuses on *why* things happened instead of the solution.

Last week in our self-assessment exercise, we used the analogy of cogs in a machine to describe how our ruminating thoughts, behaviors and reactions can keep our beliefs and negative emotions turning in our head. However, like any machine, overuse can lead to overheated parts and system failure!

This week, we will look deeper into the impact of rumination on our well-being, and how we can start to slow or even stop our rumination machines so that we can improve our health and well-being.

Stuck in a Holding Pattern

According to the *American Psychological Association*, people ruminate for a variety of reasons including:¹

Monthly Breakdown

Week 1

The 'Where': Lead-o-meter

Week 2

The 'What': Self-Assessment Exercise

Week 3

The 'Why': Research, Science and Information

Week 4

The 'How': Building up your skill

- the belief that rumination can help you gain insight into your life or a problem;
- having a history of emotional or physical trauma; and
- facing ongoing stressors that can't be controlled.

Any of us can get stuck in the habit of ruminating. This type of repetitive thinking is most commonly found in people who have certain characteristics such as perfectionism, neuroticism, and an excessive focus on their relationships with others.

In general, it is completely normal to replay or think over past events to understand where we went wrong and the lessons we can learn from past mistakes. However, when taken to the extreme, this leads to **excessive rumination**: compulsive overthinking or dwelling on the negative aspects of one's past or future. This type of overthinking is associated with obsessive tendencies and comes with elevated cognitive and emotional costs.²

Research has shown that there's a link between rumination and mental illnesses such as anxiety or depression. Over time,



'ruminators' fall into an obsessive cycle of negative thoughts which leads to feelings of helplessness, guilt, anger, or regret, as well as heightened stress and anxiety levels. Rumination and depressive states reinforce each other and can send individuals into a spiral of uncontrolled negativity.³

In clinical psychology, rumination, or brooding, is classified as an element of OCD (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder). The intrusive and distressing thoughts, brought about by rumination, soon become impossible to stop. It's precisely this loss of control over one's thoughts that has led many psychologists to make a connection between rumination and OCD.

Eventually, extreme rumination will cause an inability to handle basic tasks in our daily life. Since 'ruminators' are so absorbed in unhealthy thoughts, these interfere with their ability to perform a job and to handle personal or professional relationships.

In addition to mental health consequences, rumination has serious interpersonal effects, as ongoing brooding may erode support from friends and relatives — causing a cycle of frustration, withdrawal, and further rumination.

Overthinking can be harmful and unhelpful as people are focusing exclusively on the minute details of a problem rather than finding a solution. Similar to those who have clinical depression, the brain function in 'ruminators' is impaired as it hinders their problem-solving ability. Negative neural networks in the brain cause an unrealistic sense of despair — they see no solution in sight.³

Finally, something you may not have considered, is that every time your brain ruminates a negative event or conversation, your brain does not know the difference between the 'real thing' and something that's 'just a thought'. As you ruminate about that negative thought, your mind and body will 'experience' the same event over and over as if it is happening again and again. You will experience all the same emotions and physical reaction that accompanied that scenario in real life each time you think about it. *No wonder this isn't healthy!*

Stop the Churn

Ideally, we can be proactive and aware, and take steps to prevent ourselves from ruminating in the first place. **Last week's activity** is a good way to start identifying those things that may be putting you at risk for rumination.

It is important to identify and stop ruminating thoughts as quickly as possible. This prevents these thoughts from snowballing into something larger and more intense. If you are a 'ruminator', you can learn some strategies to help you slow and stop your thought cycle before it spirals out of control. It is never too late to break away from this damaging — and common — habit and take control of your thinking patterns. Indeed, there are ways to stop ruminating and restore your well-being, peace of mind and happiness.

5 Tips to Stop Ruminating On the Spot⁴

1. Distract Yourself

When you realize you're starting to ruminate, finding a distraction can break your thought cycle. Look around you, quickly choose something else to do, and don't give it a second thought. Consider these distractions:

- Call a friend or family member
- Do chores around your house
- Watch a show
- Draw a picture
- Read a book
- Take a walk (or dance!)

2. Make a Plan

Instead of repeating the same negative thought over and over, take that thought and make an action plan 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 realistic with your expectations.

Doing this will 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've 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've made a major mistake or when something traumatic has happened to us that we feel responsible for.

If you start ruminating on a troubling thought, try putting your repetitive thought in perspective. Recognizing what thoughts are inaccurate can help you stop ruminating.

5. Readjust Your Goals

Perfectionism and unrealistic goal setting can lead to rumination. If you set goals that are unrealistic, you may dwell on why you haven't reached a goal, or what you should have done to reach it. Setting more realistic goals that you're capable of achieving can reduce the risks of overthinking your own actions.

Next Week in ReCharge

Next week, we will look at more ways to stop rumination, as well as introduce Part 2 of our self-assessment 'cog' exercise. You will learn how to stop each of your specific small cogs on the diagram which, in turn, will stop the large cog in the centre from spiraling out of control.

Check out this video for more guidance on stopping ruminating thoughts.



Sources:

- 1 American Psychology Association (www.apa.org/monitor/nov05/cycle.aspx)
- 2 Happiness Magazine (www.happiness.com/en/magazine/personal-growth/stop-ruminating)
- 4 Psychology Today (www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/depression-management-techniques/201604/rumination-problem-in-anxiety-and-depression)
- 4 Health Line (www.healthline.com/health/how-to-stop-ruminating#tips)

LEAD-O-METER: *Are you a 'ruminator'?*

Please take 30 seconds to complete this month's short self-awareness questionnaire. Follow the link below or scan the QR code by opening your phone camera and pointing at the code.

**Complete the January
Lead-o-meter!**

We'll share the anonymous results at the end of the month!



How did you like this issue of ReCharge?

We welcome and appreciate your feedback and suggestions! [Fill out our feedback form](#) or contact [Rochelle Morandini](#).



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