

Over-thinking

A habit that fuels depression

Have you ever stewed in self-critical thoughts? Fretted over how to solve a problem without actually solving it? Psychologists call this *rumination*.

Rumination can cause mental health problems, but it can also be normal and functional. Self-critical thoughts can help us avoid mistakes. Some of that problem-solving may lead to solutions, and even worry itself can help prepare for the worst. Ruminative thoughts stem from an area of the brain called the *default mode network*, which is also involved in self awareness.

Rumination is a habit, and like any habit it can be changed. Doing so can double the chance of recovery from depression. Other conditions that benefit from reducing rumination include anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and bipolar mania.

Recognizing Rumination

The first step in changing a habit is to notice its early signs. People can ruminate about anything, but some subjects are more likely to trigger it, such as:

- Yourself and your mental or physical symptoms
- Conflicts and upsetting events from the past
- Worries about the future
- Other people's intentions
- The meaning of things ("Why" questions)
- Analyzing mistakes or set-back
- Comparing yourself to others

Get to know the subjects that trigger rumination for you, as well as the environments, like:

- Early in the morning or late at night
- When alone
- Feeling tired and bored
- Having more physical pain or tension
- Sitting and doing nothing

- Feeling disorganized and under pressure
- Withdrawing (such as into the bedroom) after getting upset

It's like a scavenger hunt, a search for the triggers that fuel the habit.

Switch it off?

Now that you've identified early signs of rumination you can start to change it. Warning: Don't try to stop ruminating. Saying "I've got to stop thinking about my daughter's problems" will only remind you of those problems. Trying to stop it can even make you ruminate about rumination, as in "Why do I waste so much time worrying?" Countering it with positive thoughts usually leads to "Yea, but..." responses that pull you back in. Instead of trying to stop it, try *starting* something else.

Engage in the Moment

Think of times when you were fully engaged with life. Living in the moment. Activities that foster this are a good antidote to rumination, such as:

- A lively conversation with a friend
- A sport, board game, or puzzle
- Comedy or entertainment
- Researching, such as on the internet
- Spiritual or religious activity
- Music or dance
- Art project, cooking, or knitting
- Riding a bike, exercise or walking
- A warm bath
- Reading book that's a page-turner (or a TV series)
- More: chrisaikenmd.com/activation

One deserves special note. *Walks in nature* reduce rumination more than walks in the city



or suburbs in studies, and nature calms activity in the ruminating default mode network.

Compassion and Empathy

These two states of mind can override the rumination circuits. Compassion means “Allowing ourselves to be moved by suffering, and experiencing the motivation to relieve it.” Empathy is “The desire to understand and appreciate the mind of another.”

Rumination doesn’t allow us to be moved by suffering. It tries to push suffering away. Rumination doesn’t awaken empathy. It pulls us inward, toward our own problems.

Imagine someone cuts you off on the highway. It’s easy to feel anger when all you see is their car. But what if the driver’s son is stranded in a dangerous part of town and he’s racing to go help? Empathy is an antidote for angry rumination.

Compassion towards others tends to build compassion towards ourselves. Instead of treating yourself like a problem that needs to be solved, try talking to yourself with a warm, supportive, accepting, encouraging voice. Simple phrases like “This too shall pass” or “I’m doing the best I can” are helpful.

Give yourself time

Multitasking, rushing, and taking on too much can cause rumination. It makes us feel like we’re not good enough or don’t get anything done. The solution won’t be easy for perfectionists: Give yourself enough time to complete tasks one by one.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a way of appreciating the present moment with intention and awareness, without overreacting or judging. It happens naturally when we do absorbing activities, and it can also grow with practice. We offer mindfulness groups, and it can also be learned through apps (*Headspace*), audio, and books: chrisaikenmd.com/mindfulness

Substitutes

Even when it hurts, there is sometimes a useful purpose in ruminating. You may be able to find healthy substitutes to fulfill the same purpose once you get in touch with what it is. Common uses of rumination include:

- Solve a problem or understand a difficult situation
- Rehearse future events
- Avoid action, confrontation, or activities where there is a risk of failure or embarrassment
- Control unwanted feelings
- An excuse for not doing things
- Improve performance and prevent mistakes

Healthy Rumination

Rumination is like an overgrown garden. There are weeds everywhere, but flowers too, and it helps to know the difference.

Rumination can be helpful, and here are some signs that it’s on a productive path:

- Thinking about answerable questions, such as “How can I ask my friend if they’d like to go to a movie with me,” rather than unanswerable ones like, “Does my friend really like me?”
- Thinking in specifics, such as “What caused me to be late to work?” rather than abstract or general terms, such as “Why am I always a failure?”
- Thoughts that lead to a useful decision or plan, rather than thoughts that lead to more rumination.
- Questions that start with “How,” are less likely to lead to rumination than those that start with “Why.” Getting into specifics, with “What, where, and when” can also be helpful.
- Thinking about goals that are realistic, rather than unreachable goals like perfection, success, or unrequited love.
- Thinking about goals that are specific and clearly defined, rather than abstract or vague goals. For example, think “to find ways to manage my distress when my family bothers me” rather than “to not be bothered by everything.”

—Chris Aiken, MD, updated 10/2/2024