

Understanding worry and rumination: Changes to thinking following a disaster

Disasters and other distressing events can change the way we think about ourselves, other people, and the world. Thoughts can become difficult to control and start going round and round in a cycle that we can't stop. This round and round type of thinking is known as worry and rumination.

Worry

This kind of round and round thinking:

- focusses on bad things that might occur in the future
- leads to feelings of fear, tension and even dread.

Typical thoughts are:

- "What if this happens again?"
- "How will I ever move on from this?"

Rumination

This kind of round and round thinking:

- dwells on things that have happened in the past
- leads to sadness, guilt, and even anger.

Typical thoughts are:

- "Why did this happen...?"
- "If only..."
- "Why didn't it turn out differently?"

When you worry and ruminate

- You don't focus on solving problems.
- It is difficult to move on from the disaster.
- You have less interest in enjoyable activities like socialising or playing sport.
- Sleep becomes disrupted.
- Your ability to concentrate is impacted.
- Increased distress and poorer quality of life.

Having occasional thoughts of “what if?” or “if only” is OK and perfectly normal. But these types of thoughts become a problem if they play over and over in your mind and turn into a rut that you can’t seem to get out of. It might feel a bit like you get ‘stuck’ on certain thoughts and find it difficult to move on. If this is familiar to you, it is important to find ways to deal with worry and rumination.

How to deal with worry and rumination

This set of exercises will help you to deal with worry and rumination. The aim of these strategies is to help you to spend less time worrying and ruminating, so you have more time to focus on what’s happening in your life and do the things that are really important to you. Try some or all of these exercises.

Distraction!

Distraction can be a great way to break the cycle of worry and rumination. Neutral or pleasant activities that require focus and concentration will direct your mind away from these unhelpful thoughts.

To distract yourself, you could try:

- useful activities – write a shopping list, cook, repair things or clean
- pleasant activities – hobbies, go to a movie, read a book, play or sing along with your favourite music
- exercise – go for a walk, play a sport, do an exercise class
- social activities – phone a friend, visit family, go to a talk
- activities to challenge your mind – count backwards from 1,000 by 7, do a crossword.

Whatever activity you choose, it is important that you can become completely absorbed by it. So pick activities that will hold your interest and write them down in the space below. When you catch yourself worrying or ruminating, start doing one of these activities.

Try to think of at least one distracting activity that is also a social activity.

My distracting activities

Focussing on the here and now

Here and now strategies can be useful. These strategies help with worry and rumination because they direct your attention toward the present moment – and away from events that happened in the past or might happen in the future.

Tip: Regularly practice your here and now strategies.

Give yourself worry and thinking time

If you find yourself constantly worrying or ruminating, set aside some 'worry and rumination' time each day specifically to do this. Give yourself permission to reflect and deal with issues related to the disaster, BUT, only do this for 15 minutes per day at a set time – for instance, between 6:00 and 6:15pm each day. If you find yourself ruminating or worrying at other times, gently remind yourself that you will have your worry time later that day.

Setting up your worry time.

- Set a regular time each day for worry and thinking
- Set an alarm to signal when it is time to stop.
- When you notice yourself worrying or ruminating outside of the set time, jot down your thoughts and resume what you were doing. You can choose to think about this later, during your designated worry and rumination time.
- During your worry and rumination time you can reflect on the things you have written on your list, but you must stop when the time is up.
- Worry and rumination can become particularly problematic when you are trying to sleep. Again, write down your worries, then remind yourself you'll deal with them tomorrow during your worry/rumination time.

Tip: Make sure your worry/rumination time is not close to your bed time.

Get specific and concrete in your thinking

One way to break the cycle of worry and rumination is to think about whether you can solve the problem you are thinking about. Ask yourself the following questions, to find the appropriate solution.

