

Tips for dealing with rumination

Many people are familiar with persistent negative thoughts about their own weaknesses and failures, (wrong) decisions or behavior in relationships or conflicts. Unlike solution-oriented thinking, rumination focuses on the past, which cannot be changed. If brooding becomes a habit, it can have a negative effect on your mood and ability to concentrate. Here are some strategies to help you deal with distressing thoughts. You can use this selection to create your own personal repertoire of strategies for different situations in which you tend to brood. Not all strategies will be equally effective for everyone, and it is often necessary to practice them.

Putting brooding rumination to the test

Regularly take two minutes to observe your thoughts. Ask yourself these questions: "Have I understood something that wasn't clear before? Did I make progress towards a solution? Did these thoughts help me to feel less self-critical, sad, anxious or angry?" If you can answer "no" to all these questions, you have probably been brooding. After doing this experiment, make notes about your situation (date, time, place, other people present or involved, particular thoughts or a particular event). This can help you to identify and overcome typical triggers in the future.

Make a decision

Many people brood because they are sure that by doing so, they will understand something better. This hope, or others like it, prevents detachment from brooding. The brooding test can be a first step in identifying false hopes. Does brooding prevent you from doing something you would rather do? Can and do you want to deal with the topic *right now*? A conscious decision not to brood can help you implement the following strategies.

Take back control of your attention

When you brood, your attention often wanders away from whatever you are doing to focus on negative thoughts that seem more important at the time. Although it doesn't help to suppress brooding thoughts ("Please don't think about a pink elephant right now"), you can create alternatives: Train your mindfulness by focusing on your surroundings. What can you see, hear or smell? How is your posture? Naming the sensations can be helpful. If your attention wanders back to brooding, acknowledge this without judging yourself and bring your attention back to your surroundings. Practice shifting your attention between different sensations without focusing on one.

Take a step back

Identify your thoughts as such ("I just had the thought..."). Thoughts are temporary phenomena. You are not your thoughts. You can use your imagination to create distance from your thoughts: for example, with leaves floating in a stream. You can relax on the banks of the stream and deposit your thoughts on the leaves as they pass, without following them or changing the speed of the stream.

Distraction/Activity

Give yourself a break from your thoughts: read something interesting, watch an interesting film, listen actively to music, an audio book or the radio, cook or eat something, call someone, get a cup of coffee, exercise... When your thoughts get stuck, a short break can help you to reorient yourself.

Postpone brooding: Set aside a time to brood

After carrying out the brooding test, note the topic, but postpone engaging with it to sometime later that day. For example, you could set aside a specified 15–20-minute time slot every day to brood. This should be at least two hours before you go to bed, and it's best if you set a timer so you do not go over your allotted time. In order to exit the brooding time, you could carry out one of the distraction activities or close with a ritual such as washing your face with cold water. Perhaps you will find out you don't even need the time to brood, as the thoughts have lost their urgency and intensity with the postponement.

Problem solving

Here is an example of how to turn brooding thoughts into problem solving. It's helpful to write about the problem as this can prevent you from drifting into brooding rumination.

1. Defining the problem: "I failed an important exam."
2. Achievable goal: "I want to be prepared when I retake the exam."
3. Steps to a solution in chronological order: "I'm going to go to the exam review and make a study plan six weeks before the exam."
4. Dealing with possible obstacles: "I will ask my boss if I can reduce my working hours three weeks before the exam."
5. Support to achieve the goal: "I will set up a study group with my classmates".

Processing emotions

Brooding can bring up negative experiences with which you have not found closure. To prevent them from taking up space unexpectedly, it can be useful to deal with them directly. Take about 20 consecutive minutes over four consecutive days to write unreservedly about the issues that are currently occupying your thoughts, preferably not during a period when you are feeling poorly. Write freely, without worrying about spelling or expression, without putting a positive spin on things or intellectualizing. This method can help you to organize and understand the subject you are brooding over, and to get used to aspects you may have avoided before.

Literature: Teismann, T. (2014). *Grübeln: Wie Denkschleifen entstehen und wie man sie löst*. Köln: Balance-Verlag.