How to Prevent Bad Moments from Ruining the Whole Day

- Reducing Rumination
- Fix It
- Worked Up
- Rethink
- Re-create Scenario
- Closed Circuit
- Mind Wandering
- Stuck in the Loop
- Fight-or-Flight
- Spinning
- Agitation
- Mental Images
- Stressful Situation

Components for Enhancing Clinician Experience and Reducing Trauma
What Is Rumination?

Rumination is when we get stuck in thinking about a stressful situation. When we are ruminating, we are still thinking about (and therefore still feeling stress about) situations hours or even days after a stressful event.

Rumination is a “looping” that happens because we mentally re-create a stressful experience that happened to us, to which our body reacts just as it would if we were in that situation right now. When we get emotionally “worked up” in response to this image, the brain creates even more mental images, which leads to more physical arousal, etc. Now we are stuck in a cycle between our imaging and our stress response that could go on for a long time. And if we are ruminating, we are less present for our next client, our family, or our next activity. Research has shown that the more time we spend in rumination, the less happy and effective we are. Rumination, then, is the exact opposite of being present in the moment (mindfulness).

How Do I Reduce My Tendency to Ruminate?

The propensity to ruminate is determined by two factors: 1) How we experience the level of threat in the circumstance, and 2) How quickly our physiological make-up allows us to recover. Some of us recover quickly and rarely ruminate. Others of us take longer to recover from a stressful event, and rumination is a near daily occurrence. Most workers in the helping professions, however, at least occasionally contend with ruminations about stressful situations.

There are strategies for reducing our tendency to carry stressful situations through the day. Some of these tips derive from rumination-focused cognitive therapy (R-CBT). By getting better at these skills, we can get better at putting stressful situations behind us and staying present:

1. Know the Difference Between Problem-Solving and Ruminating

This step is sometimes harder than it may appear. When we are thinking about a stressful situation, we may tell ourselves that we are trying to “work it out” in our mind or trying to solve the problem. Indeed, sometimes we are doing exactly that.

In order to manage our ruminations, we must catch ourselves when we are in a rumination. The key is to begin to improve our ability to make the distinction between problem-solving and ruminating (or to notice when our problem-solving has turned into rumination). This may be difficult in some cases, because sometimes we do mentally re-create situations in order to decide what we need to do to “fix” that situation. That is healthy problem-solving. But sometimes we are re-creating the situation in an endless loop that reduces our problem-solving ability and lowers our mood.

Healthy problem-solving is when we feel like we can do something about a stressful situation and are trying to decide what our action will be. When we are problem-solving, we feel empowered and are focused on what to do about the situation.

Rumination, on the other hand, is when we are focused on how unpleasant the situation was, and we can’t do anything to resolve it. When we are ruminating, we feel stressed and unable to do anything about it. Perhaps we can’t “fix” it because it already happened in the past, or because it is a circumstance that simply cannot be changed. In these situations, re-creating the scenario doesn’t lead to action. Rather, it leads to the cycle of running the scenario in our mind, feeling stressed or upset about it, leading to us thinking more about it, and now we are stuck in the loop.
The first step in reducing a rumination, then, is to get better at noticing when you are ruminating. If you have difficulty knowing whether you are problem-solving or ruminating, ask yourself this question, “Is there something I need to do about this situation?” If the answer is yes, focus your thinking on what that action is. Plan this action in as specific detail as you can. If your answer to the question is no (the situation is already in the past, or there isn’t anything you can do about it), re-creating the scenario will not be helpful to you.

2 Notice and Label When You Are Ruminating

Typically, your thoughts will move into rumination about a stressful event without your realization. When you become aware that you are stuck in a thought or image of a stressful event, signal to yourself that you are ruminating so you can take deliberate action. “I am not going to be able to fix this; I am just ruminating about it.” “I’m just spinning on this thought and need to let it go.” Or, simply, “I am ruminating and need to re-direct.”

3 Actively Avoid Mind Wandering

Once you have noticed and labeled your rumination, you must decide to do something to actively change your mind-wandering state. Rumination happens when we let our minds wander without active focus. If you are passive, your thoughts will continue to return to the event that is the source of the rumination just like a tongue returning to that jagged tooth. Thus, the next step is to decide to change your mental state with deliberateness.

4 Short-Circuit the Imaging/Emotional Reacting Circuit for as Little as Two Minutes

Ruminations can be self-perpetuating, and therefore, can go on almost endlessly. As the cognitive event (us imagining the scene that distressed us) kindles the emotional response (agitation, fight-or-flight), that energizes the cognitive imaging, which leads to more emotional reaction. This closed circuit must be interrupted to allow your mind and body to reset. The good news? For normal ruminations, a distraction as little as two minutes can do the trick.

5 Converse with Someone

A very effective way of ending the kind of mind wandering that keeps ruminations active is—very simply put—to get out of your own head. That is, engage in a conversation with someone. The subject of the conversation isn’t important; it doesn’t even have to be about the situation you have been ruminating over. Conversation is a focused activity that directs our thoughts away from our ruminative process and we begin directing our attention into the subject of the conversation, and toward the other person. This simple action can be very effective at ending a rumination and interrupting the self-perpetuating loop. Furthermore, engaging in a conversation with a person with whom we like and feel safe, activates parasympathetic recovery and helps us return to our emotional and physical baseline.
Conscious Engagement in an Absorbing Activity

Any activity that effectively holds your attention away from the rumination—and away from your own emotional response to the situation—will break the self-perpetuating circuit of the rumination. But it needs to be an activity. Again, as little as two minutes may be effective—but if we step out of the rumination for 20 minutes or more, even better. The activity might involve physical exercise or be doing something that is mentally absorbing. Anything that effectively holds your attention for a sustained time will work. Think about it now—what activity can you engage in that will hold your attention for a sustained period? Have it in mind, so it can be your “go-to” when you need it. Will reading or TV watching work? The answer is in whether it is so completely absorbing to you that it eliminates mind wandering. For most of us, it will need to be something more active or engaging than merely watching a television show or our attention will flip back and forth between the show and our rumination, allowing the ruminative circuit to continue.

Steps to Manage Rumination

**Intention**
giving yourself permission to let go

**The Antidote**
to rumination is avoiding mind wandering (task-positive network)

**Acknowledge**
that you are “brooding”—notice it and label it

**Short-Circuit**
the cognitive/emotional link—as little as 2 minutes can do the trick

**Conversation**

**Conscious Engagement**
in an activity

Examples of absorbing activities include:
- Reading
- Journaling about your thoughts and feelings
- Running
- Taking pictures
- Painting
- Baking
- Biking
- Building something
- Browsing bookstores or libraries
- Coloring
- Singing
- Swimming
- Swinging a golf club or tennis racket
- Dancing
- Drawing
- Fishing
- Walking

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Facilitator directs participants in a self-audit concerning their current supervision practices as it compares to the above.