A fact sheet about

Rumination and stuck thoughts

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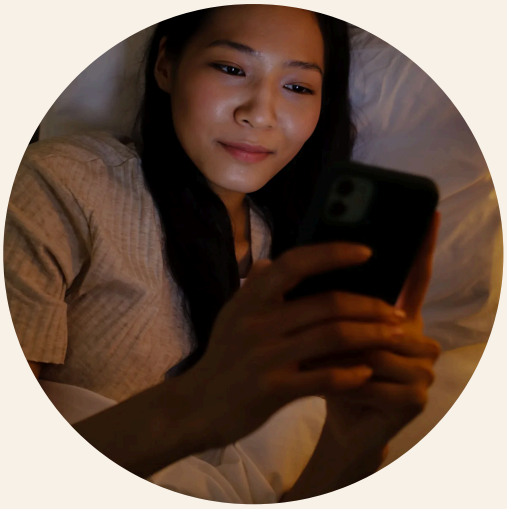
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Rumination and stuck thoughts

What rumination is, why thoughts keep coming back, and where to put them.



Key points

- Going over the same thought, talk or worry again and again is called rumination (definition below).
- It is not the same as a deep interest, which you want to be in. Rumination is unwanted, and it keeps coming back to the same place.
- If your attention tends to go deep into one thing, a hard thought can catch it in the same way.
- Rather than trying to stop the thought, it may help to give it somewhere to land: something to find out, something to do, or a note.

What rumination is, and what it is not

A talk from this morning keeps playing in your head. You go over how you replied, what the other person meant and what you wish you had shared instead. An hour later you are still on it, and nothing new has come of it.

Telling yourself to stop thinking about it may not work. What is often missing is a place for the thought to go, not more effort to push it away.

Rumination means going over the same thing again and again: a talk, a mistake, a worry or a feeling. It dwells on what is wrong and why, without moving on to doing something about it. It tends to look back, while worry tends to look ahead at what might happen.

From the outside it can look like a deep interest, because both hold your attention for a long time, but they feel different. You want to be in a deep interest or hyperfocus, and you often come out having learned or made something. Rumination is something you would leave if you could.

You can read more about hyperfocus here, and read more about a busy mind at bedtime here.

Why some thoughts keep coming back

Monotropism means attention that goes deep into one thing at a time. The people who first described it drew partly on autistic life. They said attention can get caught in a deep channel, so the same thought or action comes back again and again. That can be a joy when it is something you love, and it can hurt when it is a worry. You can read more about monotropism here.

In one study, neurodivergent adults had more repeated thoughts than other adults, but they did not report more negative thoughts. So repeated thinking on its own is not a sign that something is wrong.

In an Australian study, autistic adults found not knowing what comes next harder to bear than other adults did, and this went with more anxiety. So a question with no answer yet may keep a thought going. If you are ADHD or neurodivergent in another way, you may recognise this too.

But part of the cause may sit in how others have treated you, not only in you.

The one thing to try: give the thought somewhere to go

You do not need to stop the thought or argue with it. Instead, notice the question it keeps asking, and note it in a few words. You can write, type, draw or record a voice note: "What did they mean?" or "Did I upset them?".

Then pick the kind of loop:

- Something to find out. Ask for the missing piece, for example by sending "Can I check what you meant earlier?"
- Something to do. Pick one small step and a time for it, like "reply tomorrow after breakfast".
- Something to set down for now. Leave the note where you will find it, then turn to something you like, such as an interest, a game or music. The thought may still be there, and that is okay.

You can also change things around you so there is less to guess. You could ask the people you live with to tell you plainly if something is wrong. At work or study, you could ask for plans and feedback in writing. If someone supports you, they can help you sort the loop. Three cards or pictures, one for each kind, let you point instead of explain.

You can keep these notes in the Understanding Zoe app, typed or as a voice note. You can set a reminder there for the step you chose, so you do not have to hold it in your head.

Being gentle with yourself may help too: in research with students in general, people who were kinder to themselves went over things less. You can read more about being kind to yourself after a hard moment here.

This step comes from what autistic, ADHD and more broadly neurodivergent adults say has helped them. It has not been validated in research yet, so it is anchored in lived experience and in what the community shares about it. And lived experience is valid too.

If a thought feels alarming or not like you

Sometimes a thought arrives out of nowhere and feels shocking, like a sudden picture of something bad happening. These are called intrusive thoughts, and they are very common.

Researchers who study them say the thought on its own is not the problem. It can get hard when a thought frightens you, or when much of your day goes into checking it. That is a different thing from rumination, and a GP or another health professional can help with it.

Getting support

This page describes what many adults say about themselves. It is not an assessment, and it cannot tell you what is going on for you.

You can ask for support at any point, whether this happens every day or only now and then. A GP is a good place to start. A GP can talk with you about a Mental Health Treatment Plan, which can lower the cost of sessions. Different health professionals can help with thoughts that keep coming back.

You can also book a telehealth session through Understanding Zoe.

See a GP soon if the loops leave you feeling low or hopeless most days. Please also see a GP soon if you have thoughts of not wanting to be here.

If you are not safe right now, call Lifeline on 13 11 14, at any time of the day or night. If your life is in danger, call 000.

Sources

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Understanding Zoe is the first neuroaffirming AI-powered app that turns every report, observation and moment into an actionable next step, supporting neurodivergent people and those who care about them to thrive.

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