

# How to Stop Unhelpful Ruminating

## Objective

To increase the likelihood of effective problem-solving and decrease ruminating.

## What to Know

Do you find yourself dwelling on problems or challenges that distress you? Perhaps you repeatedly think about events from your past, or you become preoccupied with something, and you cannot get it out of your mind.

Continuously thinking the same thoughts is called rumination. There are two types of rumination:

**Helpful** – involves “what” or “how” questions, is process-focused, and supports problem-solving. You might ask, “What are some ways I can resolve this problem?” or “What can I do to make this situation better?”

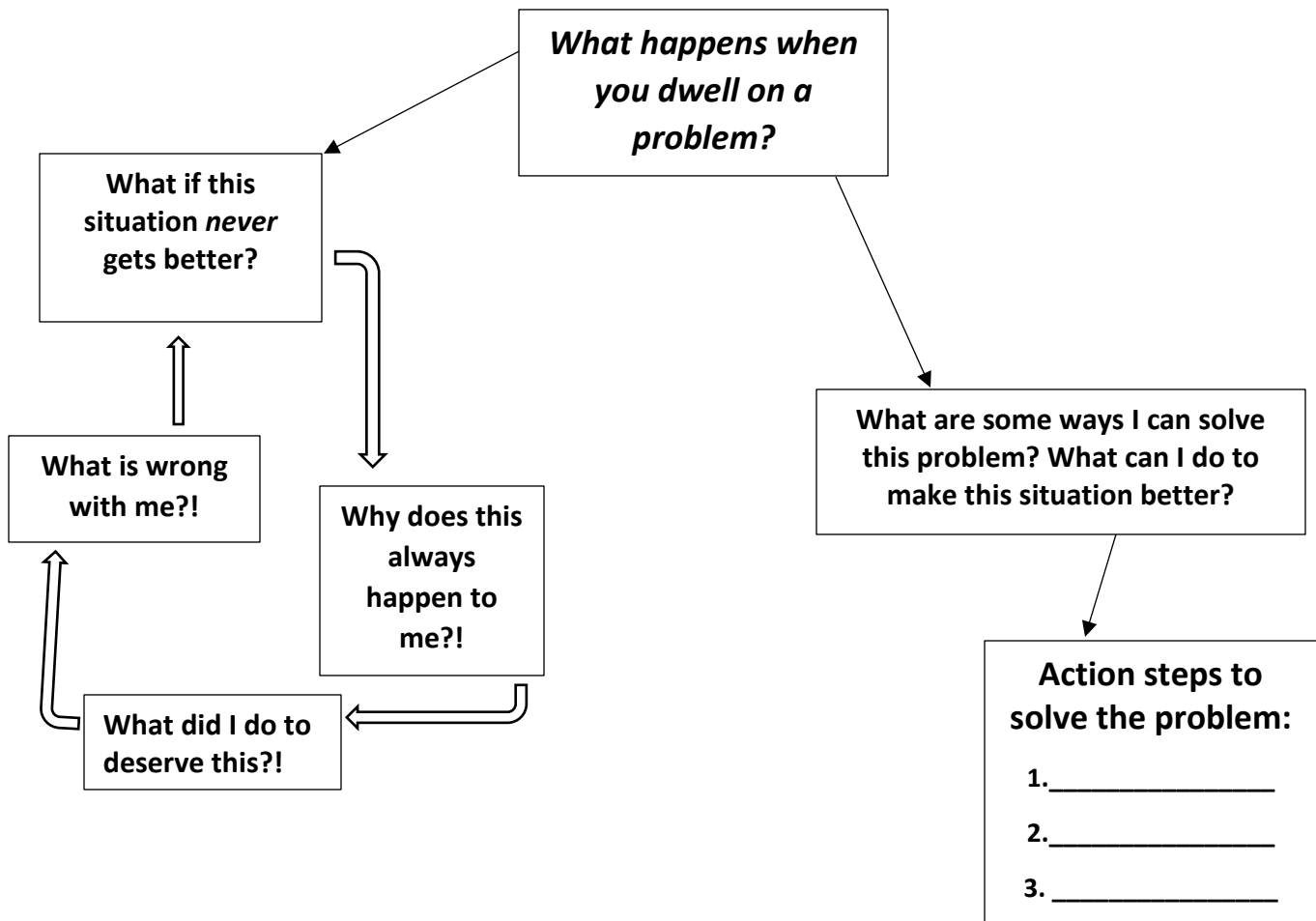
**Unhelpful** – involves “why” questions and is more evaluative because your questions attempt to make meaning of events or situations. Tend to focus on problems, its causes, and the consequences. You might ask, “Why do bad things always happen to me?” or “What if this situation never gets better?”

Rumination is normal, but if you do it excessively, it can be a problem because it does not usually lead to effective problem-solving and can even negatively affect your mental health. In addition, unhelpful rumination can prolong or intensify depression, increase anxiety, support negative thinking, affect your ability to think clearly, and block your ability to process emotions. Here are some common reasons for rumination. You:

- believe that ruminating will allow you to gain insight into your life or problems
- have a history of emotional or physical trauma
- face ongoing, uncontrolled stress
- are a perfectionist
- excessively focus on relationships with others

Once you are stuck in rumination, it can be hard to get out of it. If you notice yourself starting to ruminate in an unhelpful way, stop the thoughts as quickly as possible and focus on solutions.

Here is a visual of what can happen when you get into an unhelpful rumination cycle.



So, what can you do to stop ruminating? Here are ten tips to use when the same thoughts repeat in your head.

**1. Distract yourself.** When you start to ruminate, find a distraction to stop the thought cycle. Quickly choose something else to do, like:

- calling a loved one
- watching a funny video
- going on a walk
- reading a book
- playing with your pet
- doing a household task
- listening to music or an audiobook

**2. Plan.** Instead of repeatedly thinking about a problem, write down a plan to address it. Outline each step you need to take. Be specific and realistic. Doing this will disrupt your rumination and help you move forward.

**3. Act.** Refer to your plan and move forward with each step until your mind is at ease.

**4. Question your thoughts.** You might ruminate when you think you have made a big mistake. If you start ruminating, put your repetitive thoughts in perspective by asking yourself if the thoughts are accurate. Often you will realize your thoughts are not facts.

**5. Adjust your goals.** Perfectionism and unrealistic goal setting can lead to rumination. If you set unrealistic goals, you may start to focus on why you have not achieved the goal. To avoid self-criticism, adjust your goals as needed.

**6. Build your self-esteem.** Lack of self-esteem is associated with increased rumination. You can enhance your self-esteem by building on existing strengths or learning a new skill.

**7. Meditate.** When you are emotionally calm, and your mind is clear, you are less likely to ruminate. If your thoughts are looping, seek out a quiet space, sit down, breathe deeply, and focus on your breath.

**8. Understand your triggers.** Each time you ruminate, note the situation, including where you are, time of day, who you are with, and what you have been doing. Avoiding or managing triggers can reduce rumination.

**9. Seek help.** Talk about your repetitive thoughts with a coach or therapist. A professional can help you identify why you are ruminating and how to stop the thought cycle.

**10. Choose change.** If rumination is a habit, here are simple changes you can make that can help you stop the cycle.

- **Be a proactive problem-solver.** Identify problems you tend to ruminate about and start taking action to solve them – one step at a time.
- **Engage in positive habits.** Praise yourself for your achievements and forgive yourself for your mistakes. Focus on building your self-esteem, taking care of yourself, and doing things you enjoy.
- **Build a support system.** Loved ones, and perhaps a coach or therapist, can distract you from your ruminating thoughts and support you in skill-building.

It is possible to free yourself from ruminating thoughts by following these tips.

## What to Do

First, write down a problem you are ruminating about.

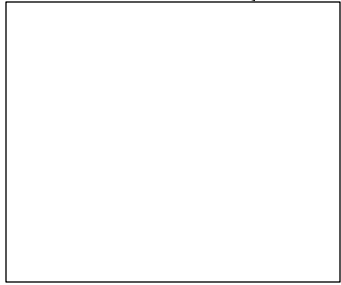
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Refer to the visual of the rumination cycle and fill in your own. On the left side, write down the repetitive thoughts you have when you ruminate. Answer the questions on the right side of the image. Use additional paper if you need more space.

**What happens when you dwell on the problem?**



**What are some ways I can solve this problem?**



**What can I do to make this situation better?**



**Action steps to solve problem:**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_

What are some ways you can distract yourself when you find yourself ruminating?

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What are some ways you can enhance your self-esteem?

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What triggers you to ruminate? Be specific.

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### **Reflections on This Exercise**

What was the hardest part about doing this exercise?

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What was the easiest part?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful).

What did you learn from this activity?

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