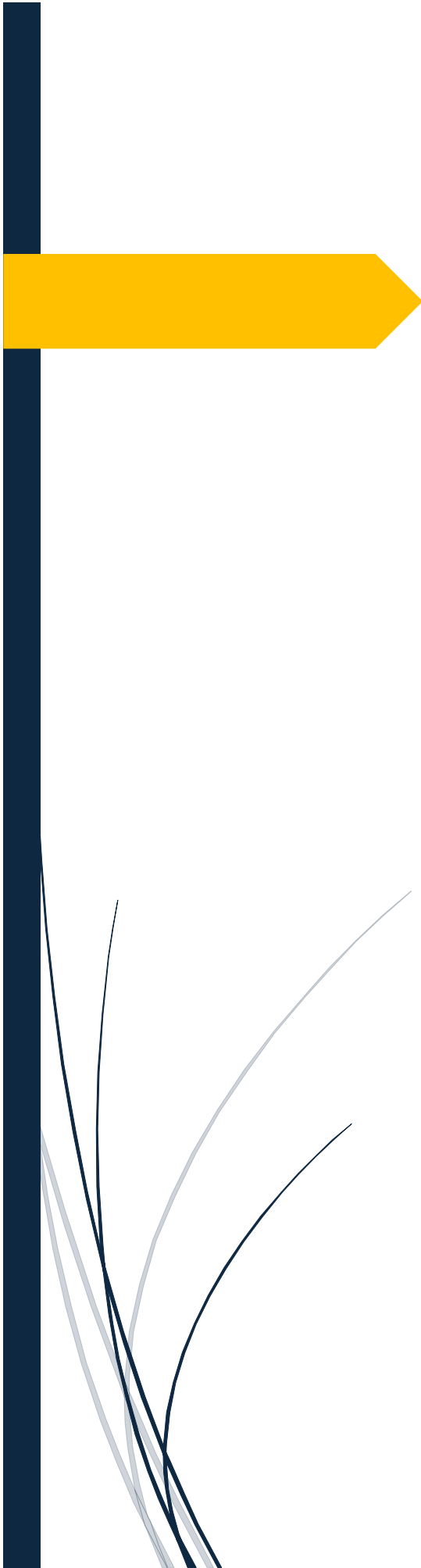




Rumination

When Your Brain Won't Let Go

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Your brain is a **problem-solving and prediction machine**.

It continually takes in information, looks for patterns, compares what is happening with previous experiences, anticipates what might happen next, and tries to solve problems.

Most of the time, this is incredibly useful.

Where are my keys? Search → Find them → Problem solved.

Why isn't my child listening to me? Notice → Think → Try something different → Gather information → Adjust.

But some problems don't resolve so easily.

- **Why did my partner cheat on me?**
- **Why did they say that?**
- **Did I make the wrong decision?**
- **What if I had done something differently?**
- **Why doesn't my child listen?**
- **What if this happens again?**

When the brain doesn't believe it has enough information to understand, resolve, or predict something, it may continue returning to the problem.

Problem → Think → No Resolution → Think Again → Still No Resolution → Think Again

This can become **rumination**.

Rumination isn't simply "thinking too much." It is often the brain repeatedly attempting to solve something **without obtaining enough new information to actually change the answer**.

Why Does the Thought Keep Coming Back?

Imagine your brain opening a file: **UNSOLVED**

Your brain may continue reopening the file because it believes:

- There is something I haven't figured out yet.
- If I think about this long enough, I'll understand it.
- If I understand it, I can prevent it from happening again.
- If I can predict it, I'll feel safer.

That makes sense.

The problem is that **thinking about a problem and solving a problem aren't necessarily the same thing**. Sometimes we are gathering useful information. Sometimes we are simply replaying the same information.

Ask: **Am I discovering something new or am I reviewing what I already know?**

That question can help distinguish **problem-solving from rumination**.

What Is Your Brain Trying to Solve?

Instead of immediately trying to stop the thought, get curious about it.

Ask: **What problem does my brain think it is solving?**

The question we repeatedly ask may not actually be the problem our brain is trying to solve.

“Why doesn't my kid listen?”

The brain may actually be trying to solve:

- Am I parenting correctly?
- Why can't I control this behavior?
- Is something wrong?
- What should I do differently next time?

“Why did my partner cheat?”

The brain may actually be trying to solve:

- Was our relationship real?
- What did I miss?
- Why wasn't I enough?
- Can I trust my judgment?
- Could this happen again?
- How would I know?

“Why did my boss say that?”

The brain may actually be trying to solve:

- Am I in trouble?
- Do they respect me?
- Is my job secure?
- Did I do something wrong?

The first therapeutic move isn't necessarily: "Stop thinking about it."

Instead, try: **"What is my brain trying to figure out?"**

Name the Actual Problem

Write down the recurring thought.

The thought I keep having is:

Now go underneath it.

What question is underneath that thought?

What is my brain trying to understand, predict, prevent, or control?

This begins to change: "I can't stop thinking about it." into: **"My brain keeps trying to solve _____."**

Now you have something you can work with.

Is This Problem Solvable?

Not every problem should be treated the same way.

When you notice yourself getting stuck, try placing the problem into one of three categories.

1. I Need More Information

There are facts or information I can reasonably obtain.

DO: Gather Information

- Ask the question.
- Have the conversation.
- Talk with the teacher.
- Review the finances.
- Make the appointment.
- Clarify what was said.
- Ask for the missing information.

Then reassess: **Did I learn something new?**

If you did, use the new information.

If you didn't, notice whether you are beginning to ask the same question in a different way.

2. I Have Enough Information to Take Action

Sometimes we already have enough information.

The brain keeps thinking because **making a decision or taking action feels harder than continuing to analyze the problem.**

DO: Take One Useful Action

- Set the boundary.
- Make the request.
- Change the routine.
- Schedule the conversation.
- Apologize.
- Create the plan.
- Try a different parenting strategy.
- Ask for help.
- Make the decision.

Move from: **Think → Think → Think → Think** to: **Think → Choose → Act → Observe**

Taking action gives your brain something especially valuable: **New Information**

You can now ask:

- **What happened?**
- **What worked?**
- **What didn't?**
- **What did I learn?**
- **What should I try next?**

3. There May Not Be an Answer

Some questions cannot be completely solved.

- What exactly was another person thinking?
- Would things have been different if I had...?
- Why did this happen to me?
- What would have happened if I made another choice?
- Can I guarantee this will never happen again?

The brain may continue searching because it believes certainty is still available.

Sometimes it isn't.

DO: Practice Tolerating What Remains Unknown

The task changes from: **“How do I solve this?”** to: **“How do I live well while some uncertainty remains?”**

Acceptance doesn't mean liking what happened, approving of it, or pretending it doesn't matter.

It means recognizing: **“I may have reached the limits of what I can know or control.”**

That is also doing therapy.

Notice When You Are Feeding the Problem

Once the brain opens an unresolved problem, we may unintentionally keep feeding it.

We might:

- Replay the conversation
- Imagine another scenario
- Search for another clue
- Ask the same question again
- Check a phone or social media
- Rehearse what we should have said
- Google the issue again
- Ask another person for reassurance
- Revisit the memory
- Imagine worst-case scenarios
- Review every possible explanation

These behaviors may provide temporary relief. But temporary relief isn't necessarily resolution.

Ask: **Did this give my brain new information or did I just feed the problem?**

Sometimes the behavior intended to reduce uncertainty actually teaches the brain:

“This problem must still be important. Keep checking.”

What Is the Rumination Doing for You?

Instead of only asking: *“Why do I keep thinking about this?”* try: **“What is thinking about this doing for me?”**

Rumination may temporarily provide:

- **A sense of control**
- **Preparation**
- **Protection**
- **Reassurance**
- **Hope of finding an answer**
- **A way to avoid making a decision**
- **A way to stay connected to what happened**
- **Protection from being surprised again**
- **The feeling that you are doing something**

This doesn't mean rumination is helping in the long term. It means the behavior may have an understandable **function**.

Ask:

- **What is this thought trying to help me understand?**
- **What is it trying to protect me from?**
- **What am I hoping another round of thinking will provide?**

Is it actually providing that?

Give Your Brain a Job

Telling yourself: "Stop thinking about it" isn't much of an assignment.

Instead, give your brain something specific to do.

Practice 1: Write It Down

When the thought appears, complete:

- **My brain is trying to solve:**
- **What I know:**
- **What I don't know:**
- **What I can reasonably find out:**
- **What I probably cannot know:**
- **What I can do next:**

Then give yourself permission to stop solving it **for now**.

Practice 2: Schedule the Problem

Sometimes the brain keeps returning to something because it doesn't want you to forget it.

Give it a return point. **"I'm not ignoring this. I'm going to give this 15 minutes at 6:30 tonight."**

If the thought returns before then: "I know. It's on the schedule."

At the scheduled time, deliberately revisit the issue.

- Write.
- Think.
- Problem-solve.
- Make a decision.
- Identify your next step.

Then stop when the scheduled time ends. This is different from avoidance.

You are deciding **when you engage the problem instead of allowing the problem to decide for you.**

Practice 3: Ask "Is There New Evidence?"

When the thought returns, ask: **"Do I have any new information since the last time I thought about this?"**

If YES:

- Process the new information.
- What does it change?
- What do you need to do?

If NO:

Tell yourself: **"I'm trying to solve the same problem with the same information."**

Then choose whether continuing to think about it is likely to produce anything useful.

Practice 4: Move From "Why?" to "What For?"

"Why?" can be useful when it produces understanding.

But sometimes "why" keeps pulling us back into the same unanswered question.

Instead of: “Why did I screw that up?”

- Try: “**What is reviewing this again trying to do for me?**”

Instead of: “Why did my partner cheat?”

- Try: “**What information am I still trying to obtain—and what would having that information do for me?**”

Instead of: “Why doesn’t my kid listen?”

- Try: “**What am I trying to accomplish as a parent, and what could I try differently?**”

The shift is: **Why? → Explanation** toward: **What For? → Function → Choice**

Practice 5: Review the Game Tape. Then Run a New Play

Reviewing an experience can be useful. But repeatedly reviewing the same play without learning anything new keeps us in the past.

Choose the situation and ask:

- **WHAT HAPPENED?** Describe the facts.
- **WHAT DID I MAKE IT MEAN?** What story or interpretation did I create?
- **WHAT DID I FEEL?**
- **WHAT WAS I TRYING TO UNDERSTAND, PROTECT, GET, OR AVOID?**
- **WHAT DID I DO?**
- **WHAT DID MY RESPONSE ACCOMPLISH?**
- **WHAT COULD I DO DIFFERENTLY NEXT TIME?**

Now stop reviewing the old play. **Run the new one.**

Imagine the situation happening again. You cannot use your original response.

What could you do instead?

- Try another.
- And another.

You don’t need the perfect response. You need **more than one available response.**

Practice 6: Redirect. Don't Fight the Thought

Trying to force yourself to **not think about something** can make the thought feel even more important.

Instead, notice it. "There's the problem again."

Name it. "My brain wants to solve this."

Check it. "I don't have any new information right now."

Orient yourself. "I know what my next action is."

Then deliberately redirect your attention.

Walk.

Play with your child.

Go outside.

Exercise.

Call someone.

Engage your senses.

Cook.

Listen to music.

Return to work.

Complete a task.

Do something that requires your attention.

The goal isn't distraction for the purpose of permanently avoiding the problem.

The practice is learning: **"This thought does not require my attention every time it asks for it."**

DO Therapy

Therapy isn't only understanding why you ruminate. Therapy is **practicing something different when the thought appears**.

Your usual pattern might be: **Thought → Analyze → Replay → Reassurance → Analyze Again**

Practice: **Thought → Notice → Name the Problem → Sort the Problem → Choose → Do → Redirect**

DO Therapy: Parenting

Thought "Why doesn't my kid listen to me?"

Automatic Response

- Replay yesterday's argument.
- Think about everything your child is doing wrong.
- Become frustrated.

- Ask yourself the same question again.

DO DIFFERENT

“My brain is trying to solve how to create more cooperation.”

Ask:

- **What do I actually know?**
- **Is there information I need?**
- **What is within my control?**
- **What is one parenting strategy I could test?**

Try something different.

Then gather new information: **Did it work? What happened? What should I adjust?**

Now your brain is actually problem-solving.

DO Therapy: Infidelity

Thought “Why did my partner cheat?”

Automatic Response

- Replay details.
- Ask another question.
- Receive reassurance.
- Feel temporary relief.
- Discover another question.
- Repeat.

DO DIFFERENT

“My brain is trying to understand what happened so I can determine whether I am safe.”

Now ask:

- **Do I need INFORMATION?** Is there something important I genuinely don't know?
- **Do I need REASSURANCE?** Am I needing connection, validation, or support right now?
- **Do I need EVIDENCE?** Am I trying to determine whether my partner is actually behaving differently?

Or am I asking a question that may not have a completely satisfying answer?

The goal isn't to prohibit questions.

It is to understand: **“What is this question trying to accomplish?”**

Then respond to the actual need.

DO Therapy: The Conversation

Thought “Why did they say that?”

Automatic Response

- Replay their tone.
- Imagine their motives.
- Create explanations.
- Become increasingly upset.

DO DIFFERENT

FACT: They said _____.

STORY: I’m interpreting that as _____.

MISSING INFORMATION: I don’t actually know _____.

CHOICE: I can _____.

Perhaps the choice is to ask. “I’ve been thinking about what you said earlier. Can you help me understand what you meant?”

Or perhaps the choice is recognizing: **“I don’t currently have enough information to know what they meant, and continuing to guess isn't giving me the answer.”**

Create Your Rumination Plan

Choose one recurring thought or problem.

- ↓ **My brain keeps trying to solve:**
- ↓ **What am I actually trying to understand, predict, prevent, or control?**
- ↓ **What facts do I already have?**
- ↓ **What information is realistically available?**
- ↓ **What might never be completely knowable?**
- ↓ **Do I need more information, action, or acceptance of uncertainty?**
- ↓ **Is there an action I can take?**
- ↓ **If there isn’t an action, what uncertainty may I need to practice tolerating?**

- ⇓ **What does continuing to think about this do for me?**
 - ⇓ **When the thought returns, what will I practice doing differently?**
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The Goal Isn't to Never Think About It

Some problems deserve thought. Some experiences need processing. Some questions need answers.

Some situations require action and some experiences may never provide every answer we want.

The goal isn't to make your brain stop doing what brains do.

The goal is to recognize when **problem-solving has stopped producing solutions and started producing a loop.**

When that happens:

- **NOTICE:** My brain opened the problem again.
- **NAME:** What is it actually trying to solve?
- **SORT:** Do I need information, action, or acceptance of uncertainty?
- **DO:** Take the next useful action.
- **REDIRECT:** If there is nothing new to solve, return your attention to the life happening in front of you.

Then repeat.

Success isn't necessarily: "I never had the thought again."

Success may initially be: **"I noticed the thought sooner, spent less time feeding it, and chose what I did next."**

That is **doing therapy.**

Additional Strategies

Practice breathing

- When the situation arises, and you begin to experience rumination then practice bringing yourself to the **PRESENT** moment through a short breathing exercise such as "box breathing." *Reference: [Box Breathing](#)*
 - Breathe in for 2-3 seconds through your nose and expand the belly...
 - Hold it for 2-3 seconds...
 - Exhale out for 5-8 seconds through your mouth and compress the belly...(Exhale is longer than the inhale)
 - Hold it for 2-3 seconds...
 - Repeat for 3-5 cycles or 1-2 minutes...
 - Set a reminder to do this 3 times a day as well as when you notice yourself becoming activated.

Practice the fire drill: STOP|DROP|ROLL.

- This translates into STOP what you are currently thinking/doing, DROP into your body and notice what/when/where is holding tension, increasing heart rate/breathing, or building dysregulated energy, and ROLL with the circumstances by focusing on the present moment and immediately stepping away from the situation and self-soothing through one or many techniques/strategies that work for you....

Notice your STUF.

- This translates into a practice of identifying the SENSATIONS taking place in the present moment. Being open to the THOUGHTS that are passing through. Noticing the URGES you are currently experiencing as well as the FEELING labels you are assigning to the circumstances.

Practice giving consent to the circumstances.

- When you begin to experience discomfort, ruminating thoughts, or other mixed emotions then try to practice the "pause" and ask yourself a question or two around consent.
 - Ask yourself:
 - *"Do I consent to this experience?"*
 - *"Do I consent to these feelings?"*
 - *"Do I consent to these thoughts?"*
 - Then, if you are not satisfied w/ the situation.
- Practice the mantra: ***"What is a different way of looking at my situation?"***

- Break the thinking loop or the mental spiral that may be occurring by intentionally disrupting the thought pattern with distancing and perspective.

Strengthen your self-compassion muscle through a Loving Kindness practice.

- Referred to as "metta." The practice can support building our ability to let go of what has happened in the past and learn from it so we can move forward in the present.
 - Loving kindness isn't positive self-talk when we're feeling down.
 - It is a genuine well-wishing that we offer to ourselves and others.
- The practice involves developing a series of statements for yourself and towards others. For example:
 - May I be happy...
 - May I be free from harm...
 - May I be healthy...
 - Then, extend the same statements towards someone else or others. For example:
 - May "They/Them" be happy...
 - May "They/Them" be free from harm...
 - May "They/Them" be healthy...
 - Link to learn more: [Loving Kindness](#)

Tap into your senses by noticing or focusing on your surroundings.

- Sensory exercises could include smell, taste, touch, sound, or through vision.
- A commonly used exercise involves 5-4-3-2-1.
 - Touch 5 things that have different surfaces, edges, or tactile feel to them...
 - Taste 4 things that have bitter, sour, sweet, or tart sensations...
 - Smell 3 things that have a range of odor from nice to rancid...
 - Listen for 2 sounds that catch your attention...
 - Focus on 1 object or image that captures your attention and notice the details within it...

Practice focusing your attention on the Bullseye.

- Grab a scrap piece of paper, napkin, or anything handy. Draw a vertical and horizontal line that crosses one another. Then, focus on the intersection where the two lines cross.

Identify how you experience "AWE."

- Practice connecting with something bigger than yourself. The objective is to attempt to connect what you see and experience as well as how it feels within your body. The practice is intended to connect with your body and simmer with the emotions that it offers. Link: [What is AWE?](#)

Consider using 2nd or 3rd person self-talk.

- To help navigate the current circumstances speak to yourself with encouragement and compassion as you would speak to a close friend. E.g., *"John/Jane, you have done this before. You will be okay. Break the steps down and you will finish on time."* Reference: [3rd Person Self-Talk](#) Reference: [Benefits of Self Talk](#)

Consider strategies and exercises to "get it out."

- Such as a "problem" journal or "dump pad." Pick a consistent time of day to give yourself permission to focus on the "problem." Then, focus your attention elsewhere!

Address the energy in your body...

- By moving your body to metabolize or discharge the **emotions** of "worry" or "anxiousness" through exercise, chores, or any vigorous activity to get the heart pumping and body in motion, etc.

Finally, a few "on-going" strategies to consider may include:

- **Thought stopping** – Say “stop” aloud or in your head to interrupt the loop.
- **Limit the "pollution"** of noise from news feeds, community updates, social media, etc. by taking a technology time-out or daily/weekly sabbatical by intentionally turning off and stepping away from technology for a few hours, a day, or as long as feasible.
- **Set a worry timer** – Allow 10–15 minutes to think about the issue—then stop.
- **Reframe negative thoughts** – Challenge and replace them with more productive thoughts.
- Filter down or **limit the sensory inputs** by reducing the amount of multi-tasking. For example, only listen to a podcast vs. listen to a podcast, search on your phone, and listen to music in the background at the same time.
- **Build a playlist or play music** – The sound and movement can release tension and divert your focus.

- **Create a "zen" zone** at bedtime by creating a space in the bedroom that tells your mind and body - "it's time to go to bed!" *Reference:* [Sleep Hygiene](#)
- **Do art or crafts** – Creativity channels energy outward.
- Practice slowing down by **limiting the "should's"|"have to's"|"must's** - as well as limiting the number of "tasks" you may be trying to accomplish in an hour/day/week. Take an inventory of the quality activities vs. the quantity activities and attempt to shift the balance towards quality.
- **Practice being "still" and "noticing."** Intentionally make time to just "sit" and "notice" what's taking place inside of you as well as notice what's taking place in the environment around you. *Reference:* [Interoception](#)
- **Cognitive defusion** – Observe thoughts, as if they are leaves on a stream, without attaching to them
- Challenge the problem by asking a problem-solving question – **“Is there anything I can do about this now?”**
- **Engage in puzzles or games** – Focuses your brain on problem-solving.
- **Go for a walk** – Movement plus nature reduces mental chatter.
- **Stretch** – Connects body awareness with mental focus
- Practice gratitude as well as make time to help others. Focusing on gratitude towards your "self" through writing down what you are grateful for as well as focusing on supporting others can be beneficial to mitigating discomfort. *Reference:* [Gratitude](#)
- **Get a hug - Give a hug** – Physical touch soothes the nervous system.