

8 Tips to Help Stop Ruminating

By Lauren Feiner, PsyD



Do you constantly replay or obsess over negative situations? Known as rumination, it can feel like a broken record. Your mind rehearses the play-by-play of what led to that horrific breakup or missing a deadline at work. Even when everything is going well, we tend to hyperfocus on the one negative thing that happened during the day, like the time our boss criticized us in front of our colleagues.

Reflecting on past experiences can be helpful in problem-solving and overcoming dilemmas, but brooding rumination takes this to the next level. It offers few new insights and often serves to intensify our negative feelings. We become narrowly focused on the things that are not going well instead of seeing the larger picture. These ruminative thoughts can keep us up late at night overanalyzing the situation.

According to Susan Nolen-Hoeksema, Ph.D., professor at Yale University, research has shown that rumination is associated with a variety of negative consequences, including depression, anxiety, PTSD, substance use, and binge-eating.

What can be done to stop ruminating? Here are some tips that may help.

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1. **Identify the thought or fear.** What is your biggest fear? Maybe you are afraid of getting fired or looking foolish in front of others. Journaling can be a great way to clarify the underlying fear.
2. **Think about the worst-case scenario.** This may sound like an awful suggestion, but we can often handle the worst-case scenario, which takes away the power of the original thought. Ask yourself two questions:
 - What is the worst thing that can happen?
 - Can I handle that?

Most likely, the answer is yes. Human beings are very resilient. Remember, sometimes our biggest hardships can turn into our biggest growth experiences. For example, I once worked with a client who was devastated after losing his job. He survived it, and as it turned out, this ended up being a blessing in disguise. It allowed him to find a position that fit his interests and lifestyle, leading to a more fulfilling and meaningful career.

3. **Let go of what you can't control.** Ask yourself “what can I change, if anything?” If you cannot change the situation, let it go. For things you can change, set up a list of small goals and make the appropriate changes.
4. **Look at mistakes as learning opportunities.** According to David Burns, Ph.D., assistant professor at Stanford University, and author of *Feeling Good*, “the quickest way to find success is to fail over and over again.” For example, I was once 30 minutes late for an interview. I did not get the job and I became very self-critical of my tardiness. Once I asked myself “what is the lesson I learned?” I quickly calmed down and applied this lesson to future experiences.

I now leave my house one hour early for interviews, which has served as a valuable lesson. No need to continue to berate myself. In addition, frequently remind yourself how far you've come. Every time you make a mistake, you learn something new.

5. **Schedule a worry break.** Schedule 20 to 30 minutes a day to worry and make the most of it. This allows for a time and place to think about all your biggest insecurities while containing it to a specific period of time. At other times of the day, remind yourself that you will have time to contemplate later.
6. **Mindfulness.** We spend so much time thinking about past mistakes or worrying about future events, that we spend very little time in the here and now. A good example of this is every time we find ourselves on “autopilot” while driving a car. The practice of mindfulness is a

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great way to reduce our “thinking” selves and increase our “sensing” selves in the here and now. For example, ask yourself what you hear, feel, smell, see and taste. This can help ground you in the present moment. Mindfulness is an important skill for enjoying the significant moments in life. Enjoying coffee with a friend can be disrupted if we begin thinking about all the things we need to do that day. When you notice your mind wandering, gently guide it back to the present.

7. **Exercise.** Go for a walk. A change of scenery can disrupt our thoughts and give us new perspective.
8. **Try therapy.** If ruminative thoughts are interfering with living the life you want to live, consider reaching out. Counseling is a great way to learn how to use these techniques with the help and guidance of a professional.

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