

Session 8: dealing with rumination

The approach we have been using in this group is drawn from CBT or Cognitive Behaviour Therapy.

CBT invites us to ask ourselves two key questions:

- Is there another way of **thinking** about things that would be more helpful to me?
- Is there something else I could **do** that would be more helpful to me?

The first question relates to your cognitions, that is, how you think about yourself and the situations you find yourself in, and whether your point of view is more or less helpful. The second question relates to how you act in a situation and whether it serves your best interests. Hence, Cognitive Behaviour Therapy.

So far we have spent most of our time focusing on what you are doing and whether it's helpful – or what you've been avoiding doing - and how to change your behaviour to get a balance of meaningful and manageable activities in your life. We are now going to start to look at thinking, but first we need to make a distinction between thoughts themselves and the process of thinking.

Thinking can be thought of as an activity, it takes time and effort, and it can be done in more or less useful and effective ways. Thoughts are what go through your mind when you're thinking.

As you read this your mind is full of thoughts: you may be wondering whether you've understood it correctly, whether it makes sense, or whether it's useful. You may also be thinking a whole lot of other thoughts too: a memory may come to mind, you may be thinking about the cup of tea you're going to make in a minute, you may be wondering whether you've remembered to buy a birthday card for your sister, you may be thinking about the friend you meant to phone, or any of a million other things.

important because there is one particular *way* of thinking that can get us into a lot of trouble – we call it rumination.

Rumination is what cows do when they chew the cud – they break down tough old grass into something they can get nutrition from by chewing it over and over again.

In the same way human beings when faced with painful memories (for example a loss or bereavement) or frightening anticipations (for example a trip to the dentist or a forthcoming exam or test) will think in a very repetitive way about those situations.

Not only is repetitive thinking something that everyone does, it can be useful. After a significant loss we would expect someone to deal with that partly by spending a lot of time thinking about the lost loved person. Someone who's got an exam will think about it frequently and may feel extremely anxious.

But in the end we adjust to a loss not through thinking and remembering alone but by adjusting our behaviour to fit a world in which the loved person is missing, by investing energy in other relationships, and by memorializing the lost loved one.

Similarly we don't pass an exam by worrying about it – in fact that can be highly counter-productive if it prevents us doing the study and practice that we need to be competent enough to pass –no one ever passed their driving test simply by putting in a good, long stint of worrying!

So repetitive thinking is not a problem when it serves a useful function but is not very helpful on its own. And in depression rumination can be terribly destructive as it sucks emotion and energy away from activities that might take us forward and leaves us stranded in a deep, dark pit of failure, defeat and loneliness.

Some of the ways repetitive thinking can show itself is as chronic worry about the future where we dwell on 'what ifs'. Another way is re-running a painful memory and trying to make it come out right, or stewing in 'if only'. We might obsess about a detail, or brood over a slight or hurt, or turn a problem over and over in our minds, or rack our brain trying to analyze what caused our depression.

People tend to have a theme to their rumination and it can be helpful to identify that. Take a moment to think about what you tend to ruminate about. For each category that fits you, write down what it is that you ruminate about, so for example if you have suffered a painful loss, such as the loss of a parent, under bereavement write down the details of the person you are mourning. Write down next to it how you feel when you ruminate (e.g. sad, angry, anxious, ashamed, guilty, embarrassed, envious, jealous, or frustrated):

Bereavement: _____

Relationship problems and breakups: _____

Hurts, disappointments and betrayals: _____

Worries about the future: _____

Bad decisions you've made: _____

Other people's negative opinion of you: _____

Other: _____

Take a moment to think about what you've written:

What themes do you notice?

How does it make you feel when you ruminate?

What effect does it have on what you do – what's the relationship between ruminating and avoidance?

What does your rumination theme tell you about any 'unfinished business' that you're not dealing with?

Once you've recognised your themes you're in a position to do something about rumination.

The first task is to recognise when you're ruminating. This is not always easy because rumination removes us from the world of our five senses (touch, taste, smell, vision, hearing) and sometimes we only spot that we're ruminating when something happens to bring us out of ourselves – the toast is starting to burn or our partner tells us that we haven't heard a word they're saying.

Once you realise you have been ruminating you might find it useful to stop and ask yourself the following questions:

- 1) What progress has rumination helped me make (if any) towards solving a problem?
- 2) What do I now understand about a problem (or my feelings about it) as a result of ruminating that I haven't understood before?
- 3) How has ruminating affected my mood – do I feel more or less self-critical, depressed, helpless or hopeless now?

Rumination can be thought of as a faulty form of emotional processing or problem solving – so in order to make rumination redundant you need to put in place more effective ways to process past hurts or to address worries.

What we're going to ask you to do over the forthcoming week is to keep a record of your rumination: we want you to write down the situation you're in when you start to 'space out' or to ruminate and use that as a cue to do something different. If rumination is an activity then you always have the choice to do something else.

Using the worksheet keep a list of situations when you ruminate; what you were ruminating about and what you either did (or could have done) instead; and the effect of either continuing to ruminate or doing something different. We've included an example at the top to help you get started.

Come back and tell us how you've got on.

Until we see you next week, Good Luck

Rumination diary

Situation	Rumination topic	Alternative Action	Consequence
Lying in bed on Monday morning at 10-30am	My life is going nowhere, I should be getting up, I'm such a failure, I can't face doing anything	Got up, had a shower, walked to the paper shop and bought a paper, came home and circled all the jobs I could apply for	Felt more energised but anxious about applying for a job

Rumination diary

Situation	Rumination topic	Alternative Action	Consequence