

AVOIDING THE PITFALLS OF RUMINATION

There is great value and potential growth to be had by reflecting on a specific event, interaction etc. looking for the learnings. However, I have found that more than a few of my highly intelligent, competent, successful, achievement-oriented and maybe a bit perfectionistic clients can take this tendency to the extreme. We know we shouldn't engage in 'post-mortems' of 'that conversation I had', 'that presentation I did', or 'that interview last week', but nonetheless many days later we are still reflecting on what could I have done better. If you fall into this category read on...

As psychologist, Michelle Harris* says, when we find ourselves going over and over the same information without recognising there is nothing being achieved, or compulsively focusing our attention on distressing thoughts, we have tipped over into rumination. When we are ruminating, we tend to go over the same thoughts from different angles; what we are actually doing is swirling around the same thoughts in slightly different language. This can be a sign of anxiety which is definitely not good for our mental health and wellbeing.

Michelle suggests that we need to be aware of and own, that this is anxiety. We need to become consciously aware of our thought patterns and our anxious responses and label them as such. This can be easier to do when we have an objective person or therapist challenging or highlighting our irrational thinking but if you want to try and do this on your own, then she suggests that one of the best methods is to write down – using pen and paper – what the 'anxious' (even though you might not define it as such yet) thought is and then all the associated thoughts that attach to that thought.

Whether you feel caught in a repeating thought loop on a specific topic or more generally, try out the following practical exercise that Michelle uses with her clients.

A three-column approach

The important thing in this exercise is to write down all your associated, ruminating thoughts, but write them down only ONCE. Once you have written down the thoughts, take a look at your list and say out loud, some version of *"I have already written that, so there is no value-add in repeating it."*

Once you have a list of thoughts, you can then start to tackle them. Take a new piece of paper and divide it into three columns.

Start with the middle column and label it **"Facts"**. Transfer to this column any of the thoughts you wrote down that you know to be true. The *only* information you can write here are the facts of the kind that would stand up in court. That is, information that you know without a doubt to be absolutely true.

Now label the column to the left, **"Possible Scenarios"** and into this column copy your anxious thoughts. This column is creative. Often it is filled with 'what if' scenarios; or interpretations of facts; it is often laced with worse case scenarios; or it has statements that are assuming knowledge of what someone else is thinking.

While it feels very true to you, in reality nothing you write in this column is evidence based, none of it would stand up in court; and none of it is adding any value to your life.

This is the column that film writers draw on when creating scripts, so if you want to write a script or a fictional story this is the column to use, but otherwise for your mental health it is better to stick to the 'Facts' column.

At this point you will have transcribed all your thoughts from your first piece of paper. If not, take a look at what remains and put it into either column 1 or column 2.

Now turn to the final column on the right and label it either "Logical Questions" or "Gathering Further Facts".

In this column write down some questions that would help you ascertain whether there is more information available to you right now or that you could get by asking questions of others. Note the intent of these questions is to gather information that you can add to the "Facts" column. Sometimes the facts we find from further questions is that no one has the answer to our question.

We all carry what Bob Kegan and Lisa Lahey in their 2009 book, *Immunity to Change*, call 'big assumptions'; assumptions that we hold as truths, 100% and 100% of the time. These assumptions tend to run us, often at a sub-conscious level; they can fuel your Possible Scenarios (column 1) and they can colour the questions you write down under "Gathering Further Facts" (column 3). Column 3 is tricky because as Michelle says, the tendency for someone who is anxious, and in an automatic negative thinking pattern, is to ask different questions over and over in different ways, trying to find information that will support their catastrophic thinking. So check your questions in column 3; are they designed to surface new facts and not to fuel the possible scenarios in column 1? Do the questions and the information you might gain from them, add value to your decision making?

Once we have completed the three columns, you do not need to re-write them in different ways. Keep what you have written, look at it in its totality. Michelle suggests writing a statement like "all my thoughts are here if I need them, but for now they are not new thoughts, they are not rational, and I can let them sit. They will be there if I need them later".

One of the core characteristics of resilience is choosing where to focus our attention. Every time you are tempted to circle back to 'that event', ask yourself the question that Lucy Hone in her 2019 TED Talk, [3 Secrets of Resilient People](#) suggests, "is what I am doing (this thought, action, behaviour) helping me or harming me". If the answer is the latter, what can you shift your attention to that would be beneficial?

You also might like to check out the work of [Kristin Neff](#) on both resilience and self-compassion.

Remember, you are not alone in having these thoughts, but left inside your head, they are doing you more harm than good.