

Rumination or Problem-Solving?

NOTICING THE LOOP · FINDING THE NEXT STEP

Recognise repetitive thinking vs useful problem-solving

Thinking things through can help. But sometimes the same thoughts circle round without leading anywhere, and we end up feeling worse. Research suggests that **how** we think about a problem matters: concrete, step-focused thinking tends to be more helpful than going over the same “why” questions again and again (Watkins, 2008).

01 Two kinds of thinking

They can feel similar, but lead to different places

	 Rumination Going round in circles	 Problem-solving Moving towards a next step
THE QUESTION	“Why did this happen? Why am I like this?”	“What could I do next? How could I start?”
THE STYLE	Abstract, general and evaluative	Concrete, specific and practical
THE FOCUS	Replaying the past or repeating “what ifs”	What can be done now, or soon
THE RESULT	No clear end point; mood often dips further	A plan, a decision, or accepting what can’t be changed
HOW IT FEELS	Stuck, heavy, restless	Effortful, but with a sense of direction

02 Quick check: is this thinking helping?

Pause and answer honestly

AFTER THINKING ABOUT THIS FOR A WHILE...	YES	NO
Am I closer to a decision or next step?	☐	☐
Am I thinking about specific actions, not just “why”?	☐	☐
Is this something I can influence, at least in part?	☐	☐
Do I feel more able to act, rather than more stuck?	☐	☐

Mostly yes?

You may be problem-solving. Keep going, and turn it into a plan.

Mostly no?

You may be ruminating. It could help to shift gears, using the steps below.

03 Shifting gears

Ways to step out of the loop

1
Name it
 Noticing the pattern can create a little distance from it.
“I’m going round in circles again.”

2
Ask “how”, not “why”
 Move from big, abstract questions to concrete, specific ones.
“How could I take one small step?”

3
Act, or set it aside
 If there is a step, plan when you’ll take it. If not, practise letting it be for now.

4
Shift your attention
 An absorbing task, some movement or a conversation can help interrupt the loop.

04 From loop to next step

Try it with something on your mind

1 The thought that keeps going round _____

2 The “why” question I keep asking _____

3 Turned into a “how” question _____

4 Can I act on this?
☐ **Yes — one small step, and when** _____

☐ **No, or not now — what I’ll do instead** _____

Before, I feel stuck

0 = not at all · 10 = completely



After, I feel stuck

any change, or none, is useful to notice



What the research suggests: rumination has been linked with prolonged low mood and with poorer problem-solving, and is associated with depression, anxiety and sleep difficulties (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008; Watkins & Roberts, 2020). Shifting to more concrete, specific thinking may help some people, though research on these approaches is still developing.

When to seek support: if repetitive thinking is frequent, distressing, or affecting your sleep, mood or daily life, consider speaking with your psychologist or GP.

SOURCES

Nolen-Hoeksema, S., Wisco, B. E., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2008). Rethinking rumination. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 3(5), 400–424.

Watkins, E. R. (2008). Constructive and unconstructive repetitive thought. *Psychological Bulletin*, 134(2), 163–206.

Watkins, E. R., & Roberts, H. (2020). Reflecting on rumination: Consequences, causes, mechanisms and treatment of rumination. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 127, 103573.