

The Metacognitive Model of Depression

How beliefs about the value of rumination — and later, its dangers — can keep low mood going, based on Adrian Wells' metacognitive model.

A self-perpetuating cycle

Rumination doesn't just reflect low mood — it helps maintain it. As thoughts, behaviours and emotions interact, they keep the underlying metacognitive beliefs switched on.

TRIGGER

A negative thought, feeling, or event (e.g. low mood, a setback, criticism).



POSITIVE METACOGNITIVE BELIEFS ACTIVATED

Beliefs that dwelling on the trigger will help.

"Thinking about this will help me understand it." "I need to work out why I feel this way."



RUMINATION

A repetitive, passive style of thinking about the causes and meaning of low mood, rather than solving the problem.

"Why do I feel like this?" "What's wrong with me?"



NEGATIVE METACOGNITIVE BELIEFS ACTIVATED

Beliefs that this thinking is now uncontrollable, harmful, or a sign something is wrong.

"I can't switch this off." "My thinking is a problem." "This means there's something seriously wrong with me."



DEPRESSIVE THINKING STYLE

Self-focused, negative thinking about self, world and future intensifies.

"I'm a failure." "Nothing will get better."



BEHAVIOUR

Withdrawal, reduced activity, avoidance, safety behaviours.

THOUGHT CONTROL

Attempts to suppress or control thoughts and feelings — e.g. distraction, over-analysing.

EMOTION

Low mood, reduced motivation, hopelessness, helplessness.

Why it can feel so stuck

With repetition, rumination becomes habitual. Negative beliefs about it grow stronger too, making the pattern feel harder to interrupt — even though it can be.

Key features of the model

- Focuses on *how* a person relates to their thoughts, not the content of the thoughts themselves.
- Explains how rumination is triggered and then maintained by beliefs about its usefulness.
- Shows how both positive and negative metacognitive beliefs play a role.
- Highlights how attempts to control thoughts can keep the cycle going.

Positive metacognitive beliefs

- *"Thinking it through will help me understand it."*
- *"If I analyse this enough, I'll find a solution."*
- *"Dwelling on this shows I take it seriously."*
- *"I need to keep thinking so I don't make the same mistake again."*

Negative metacognitive beliefs

- *"I can't stop thinking like this."*
- *"My thinking is out of control."*
- *"These thoughts could make me worse, or harm me."*
- *"I'll never be able to manage my thoughts."*



MCT FOCUS

Reduce reliance on rumination · Modify metacognitive beliefs · Change how you respond to thoughts, not their content

SOURCES

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