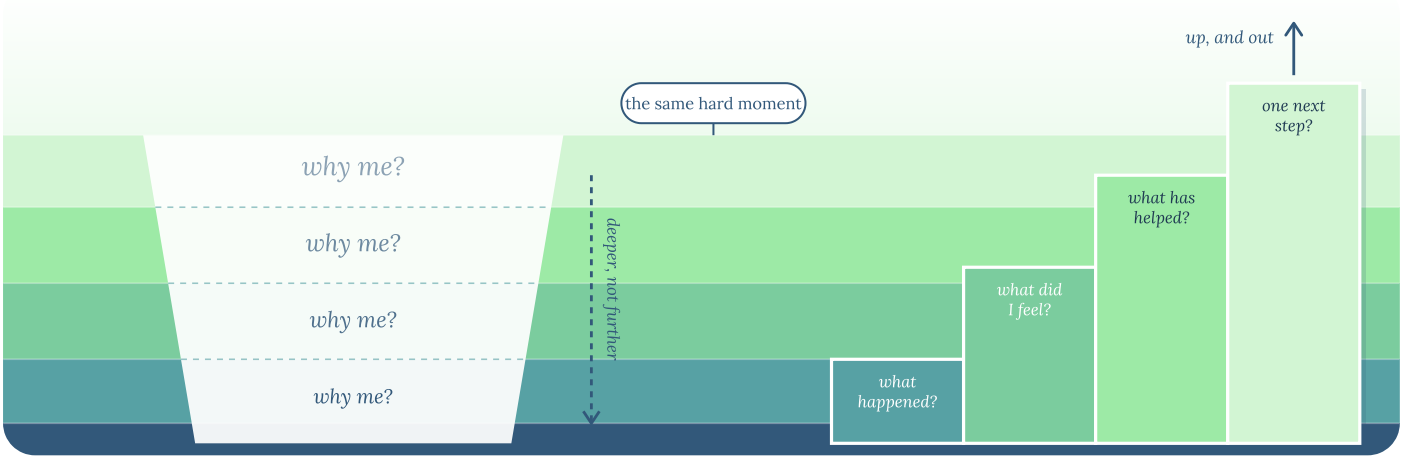
Reflecting or Ruminating?

The same moment can pull us inward, or help us move forward

Going over hard experiences is natural. Sometimes it helps us understand and recover; sometimes it circles, and leaves us feeling worse. Research suggests the difference often lies less in what we think about than in how we think about it: the kinds of questions we ask, and which direction they take us (Watkins, 2008; Kross & Ayduk, 2011).

RUMINATING · DIGGING THE SAME HOLE — **REFLECTING · BUILDING STEPS**



the same question, again and again: deeper, but no further

the same ground, used to build a way up and out

01 How to tell the difference

researchers distinguish brooding from reflection (Treynor et al., 2003); most of us do both

Ruminating		Reflecting
"Why me?" Big questions with no clear answer	QUESTIONS	"What happened?" Specific and concrete
Judging what's wrong with me	FOCUS	Details, options and next steps
Reliving it, again and again	VIEWPOINT	Stepping back, as if from a distance
Back to the same place	WHERE IT GOES	Towards understanding or acceptance
Heavier and more stuck	AFTERWARDS	Perhaps still sad, but clearer

02 Check in with yourself

when you notice you're going over something

		YES	NO
1	Am I moving closer to understanding or a next step?	☐	☐
2	Am I thinking about specifics, not verdicts on myself?	☐	☐
3	Do I feel clearer, or no worse, than ten minutes ago?	☐	☐
4	Is there something here I can act on?	☐	☐
5	Is this new thinking, not the same loop?	☐	☐

Mostly yes? You're probably reflecting; give it a natural end. *Mostly no?* You may be ruminating, which is very human. Try one concrete question, such as "what could I do next?", or set it aside for now.

WHY RUMINATION CAN BE HARD TO LEAVE

It feels *useful*

Going over things can feel like problem-solving, even when nothing new emerges.

It promises *control*

It can seem like a way to prevent it happening again.

It becomes a *habit*

Certain times, places or moods can start the loop on their own.

One way to step back

Try picturing the situation from a distance, like a "fly on the wall" watching it unfold, rather than reliving it through your own eyes. Stepping back like this can help people make sense of painful experiences with less distress (Kross & Ayduk, 2011).

SOURCES

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

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