

BOOKLET SEVEN

Thinking habits



Contents

Why look at thinking habits	2-3
The difference between unhelpful and helpful thinking	4-5
Thinking patterns as habits	6-7
Common characteristics and patterns	8-14
Are these familiar?	15
Why unhelpful thinking persists	16-17
The unhelpful thinking record	18-21
Learning from the rumination record	22-25
A plan to tackle unhelpful thinking	26-31

Introduction: why look at thinking habits?

As human beings who have learnt language, we tend to live not only in the real world, which certainly brings us some problems, but also in the world created by our thoughts, which can bring many more. The writer Mark Twain observed, “*My life has been filled with many tragedies, most of which never occurred.*”

You may have noticed that much of the time there is a sort of running commentary going on in your head. Most of us talk or think to ourselves as we go about our daily lives.

This self-talk may be encouraging

you can do it!

or critical

don't be so weak!

or moaning and muttering

It's not fair

or fantasising

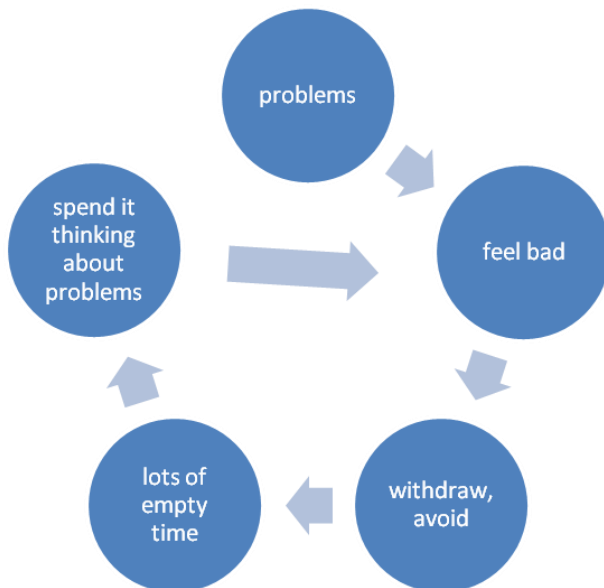
And then they lived happily ever after

To a surprisingly large extent our experience of life is the way it is because of what we are saying to ourselves.

Just as with any other behaviour, some self-talk is helpful, and some is definitely not.

When faced with problems, much of our thinking is naturally enough about those problems. This is obviously good thing if it helps us solve those problems and move forward, as we saw in Booklet Six.

However, spending a lot of time dwelling on difficulties can have the opposite effect: it can solidify depression and make it harder to take any practical steps that might be needed to sort out the problems. This vicious circle was one of the depression traps outlined in Booklet One.

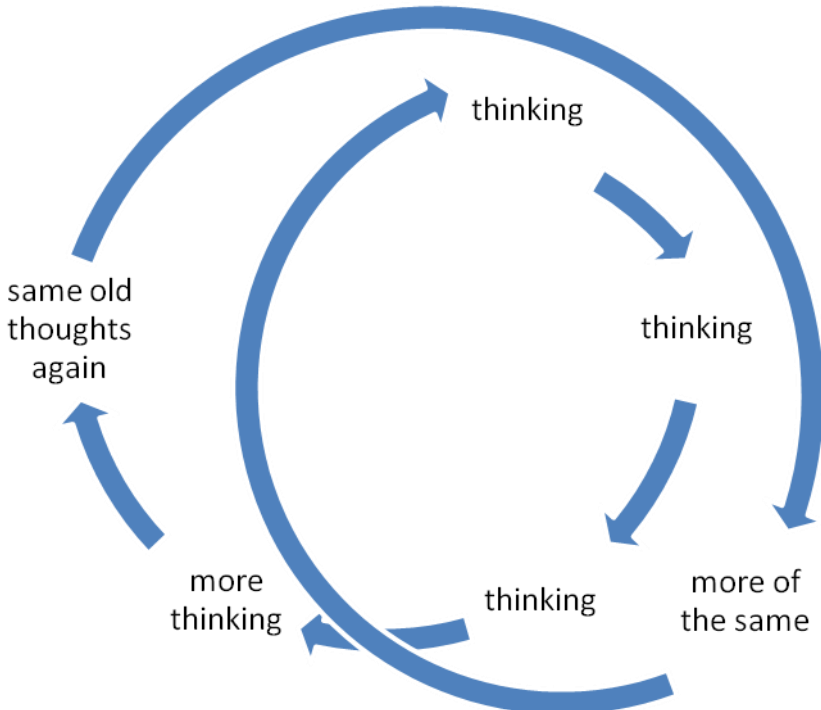


The difference between helpful and unhelpful thinking

Unhelpful thinking tends to go round and round, getting more tangled, and going nowhere.

It tends to drain energy, increase tension, and lower mood, making it more difficult, not easier, to solve the problems that it is trying to address.

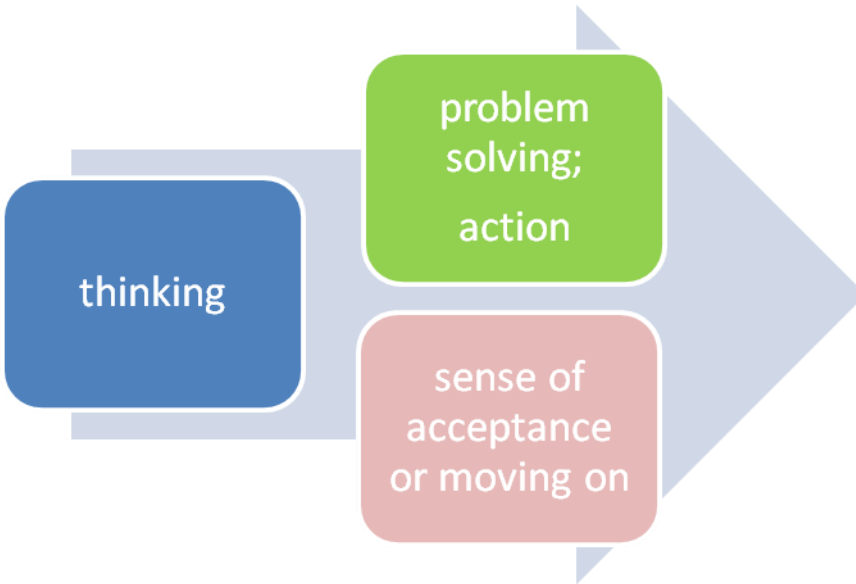
Dwelling on problems for lengthy periods of time is sometimes called **rumination**.



Of course not all thinking is unhelpful.

Helpful thinking moves us forwards.

It usually makes things feel clearer and is sometimes associated with increased energy, a sense of ease, and a slight lifting of mood.



Helpful thinking about problems is sometimes called reflection. It usually has a lighter, more balanced feel than unhelpful rumination.

Thinking patterns as habits

Thinking patterns are learnt habits. All habits take time to change, but it can be particularly difficult when the habit has become so automatic that we are hardly aware that we are doing it. This means that the first step towards changing is to **notice when it is happening**. A good way to do this is by **keeping a record**. There is space to do this on pages 20-21.

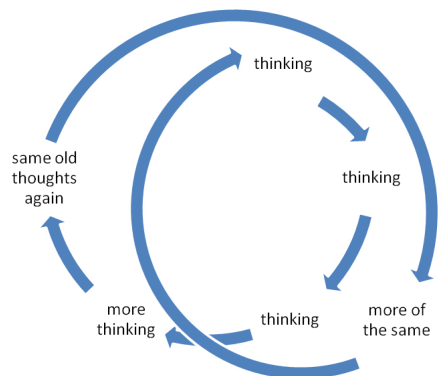
This isn't easy because most of us are not used to observing the activity of our own minds. We tend to look at the world through our thoughts rather than look at the thoughts themselves. A bit like sunglasses, we may forget we are wearing them, even though they colour everything.

So before starting your record, it may be helpful to get some ideas about what it is you are looking out for. The next few pages describe some common characteristics and common patterns of unhelpful thinking. It isn't possible to cover everything and your own patterns may well be different from the ones described here, but hopefully this will get you started in discovering your own.

Common characteristics of unhelpful thinking

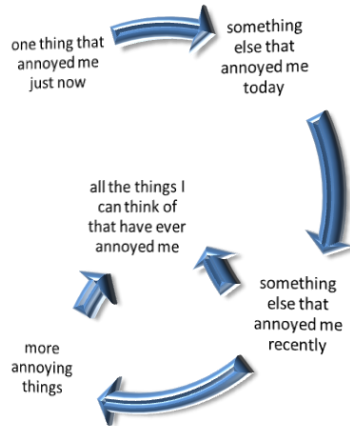
Unhelpful thinking often has at least one of the following characteristics:

- As we have already noted, it is **repetitive**, it tends to go round and round



- It often **proliferates**.

For example, it may start from one mistake made to today, but then go onto a couple from last week, another from last month, and so on. More seems to stick to it as it goes round, a bit like a snowball.



- Sometimes, it is like **biased reporting**, as if trying to make a more sensational story by presenting the evidence all on one side, blowing things out of proportion, exaggerating and make a big deal when in fact this is quite unnecessary. (Who is listening, anyway?)

- It often has quite a pull. There may be **a sense that it is important**, and that other things are unwanted distractions. We may notice some irritation when other demands intrude.

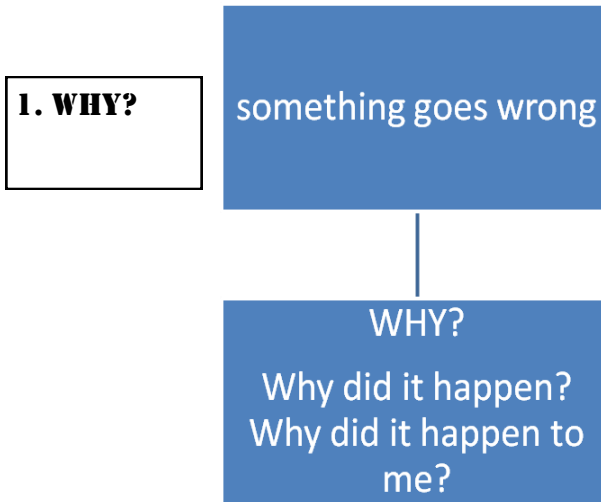
Common patterns and themes

The next few pages outline some common patterns of thinking that can be unhelpful if they go on for too long. Some may be familiar or be similar in some way to your own thinking patterns. Or they may just give you some clues as to the kind of thing to look for. You may want to have second look after you have kept your own record of thinking habits.

Common patterns of unhelpful thinking

As we have already seen, depression often starts with things going wrong.

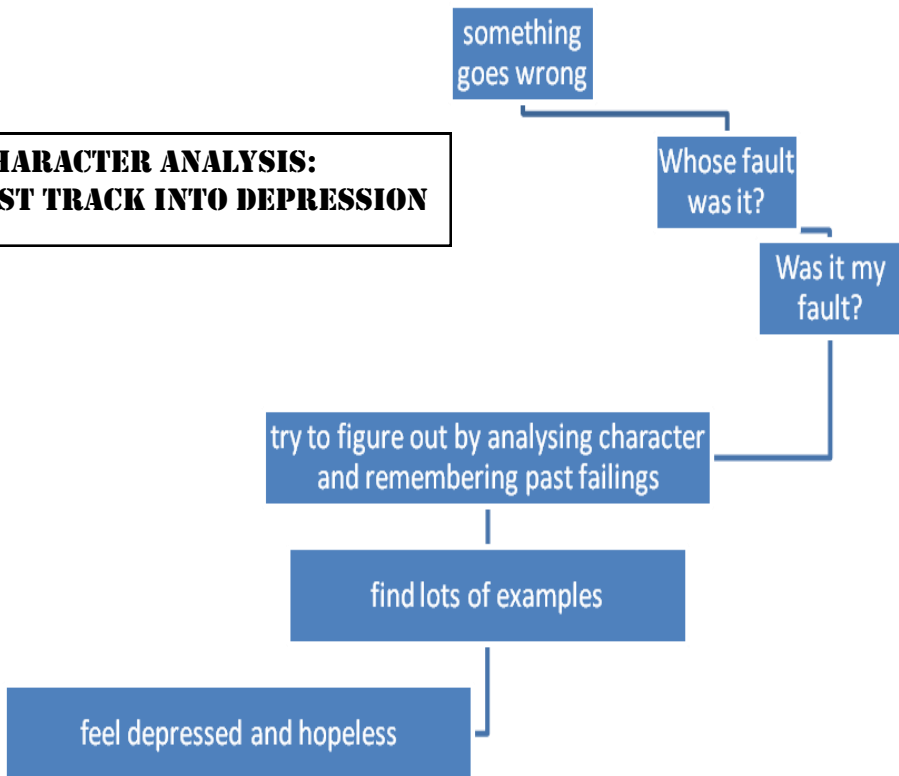
When something goes wrong, it is natural enough to try to understand why.



The problem is that often there is no satisfactory answer, and what's more, we can easily jump onto a train of thought that is just a fast track into depression.

For example, one thing we have often learnt to do when things go wrong is to **try to decide whose fault** it was. One possibility that is likely to come to mind is that it was our fault. In order to figure out if this is true, if it really is our fault, we may start trying to analyse our character, look for examples of mistakes or failings in the past, etc.

**2. CHARACTER ANALYSIS:
A FAST TRACK INTO DEPRESSION**



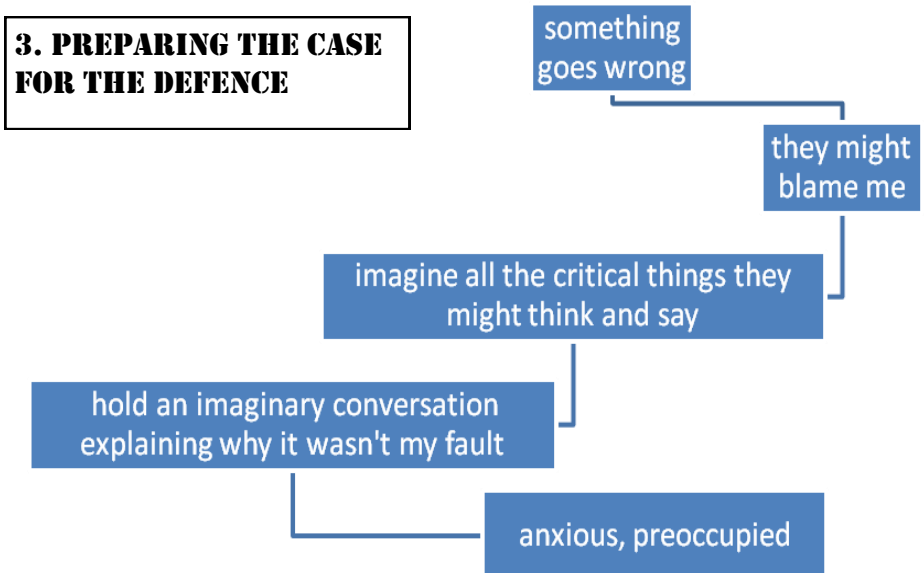
People who experience depression are particularly likely to blame themselves for things that go wrong. This has been called depressive attributional bias. It makes sense that this pattern of thought would lead to depression because if we think the cause was our own personal weakness, it is very difficult to see ways to make things go better in future.

So not only is this a fast track into feeling depressed, but it also tends to undermine motivation and problem solving. It makes it harder to activate ourselves.

It can feel important (when I understand what is wrong with me, I will be able to put it right?), but very rarely is.

As we have already seen, when something goes wrong it is very common to have the thought that others will blame us and think it is our fault.

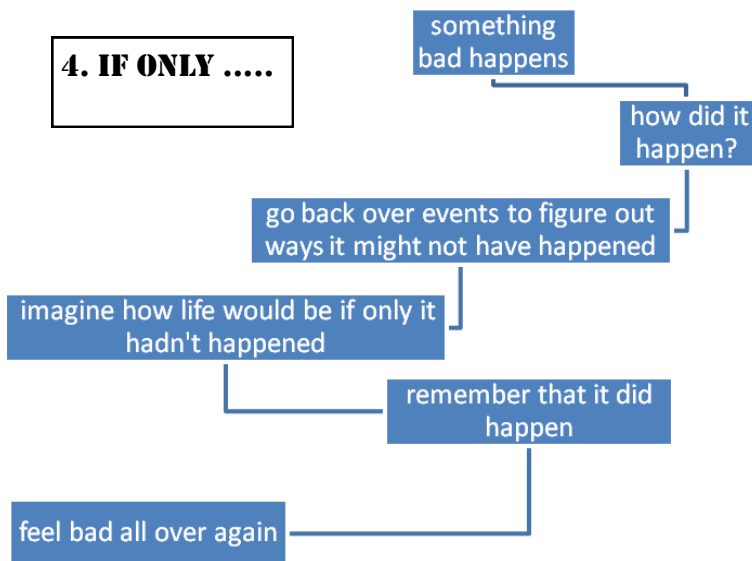
This can lead us onto a train of thought defending ourselves from this imagined attack. We fight back.



Of course there are some occasions when this can be useful.

However, quite often the entire scenario is only taking place in our imagination, and simply leads to anxious preoccupation. Indeed, sometimes the only critic is ourselves. No-one else is listening.

We can all find it very difficult to accept some of the bad things that happen, things that we really didn't want to happen. There is a very human tendency to go back over events trying to figure out how things could have turned out differently. This can easily lead to a pattern of thinking commonly know as IF ONLY-ing (or in technical jargon, upward counterfactual thinking).



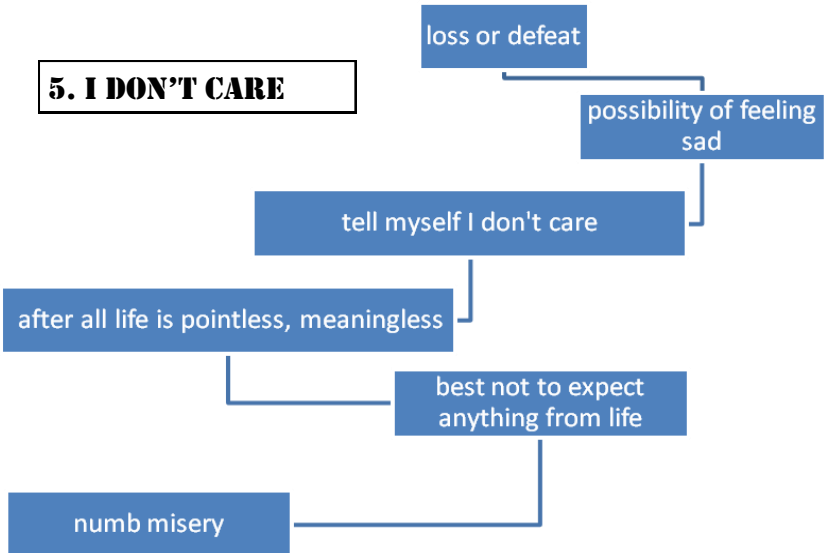
It is easy to see how this thinking can go round and round. In the short term we might even feel better for a while as we imagine how things might have turned out the way we wanted. However, all too soon, we are faced again with the painful reality that what happened happened, and we can't change it.

This kind of IF ONLY thinking is very normal, but can be a problem if

You can probably see from some of the examples we have already looked at, that some internal talk (or thinking) is about us trying to convince ourselves of something. Perhaps to convince ourselves that something was not our fault, for example. Sometimes we may also be trying to convince ourselves that we do not care.

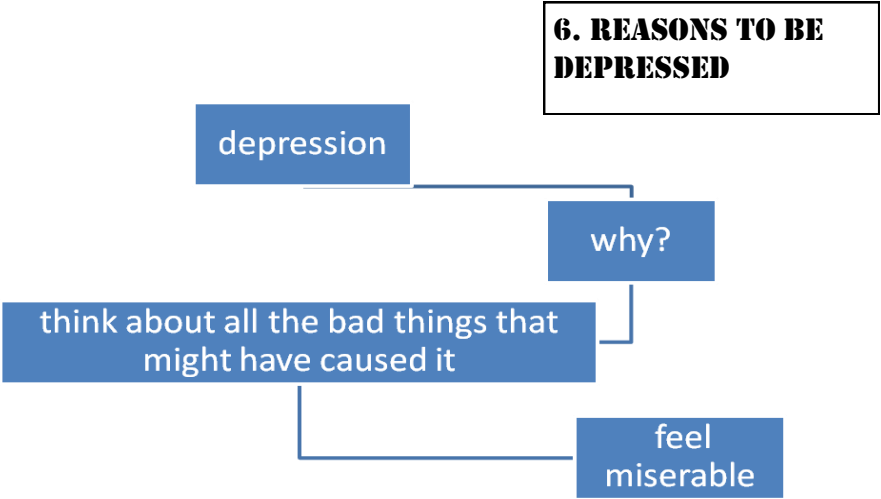
We generally feel bad when bad things happen. We might feel sad, angry, ashamed, vulnerable, guilty, or all of these things. That's normal. However, it is also very understandable that we would sometimes try to protect ourselves from these feelings, perhaps by lowering our expectations of other people, or of what life has to offer.

The problem is that our experience of life is influenced a great deal by what we tell ourselves, and if we keep on about how pointless it all is, that is how it starts to feel. We numb happiness just as much as sadness.



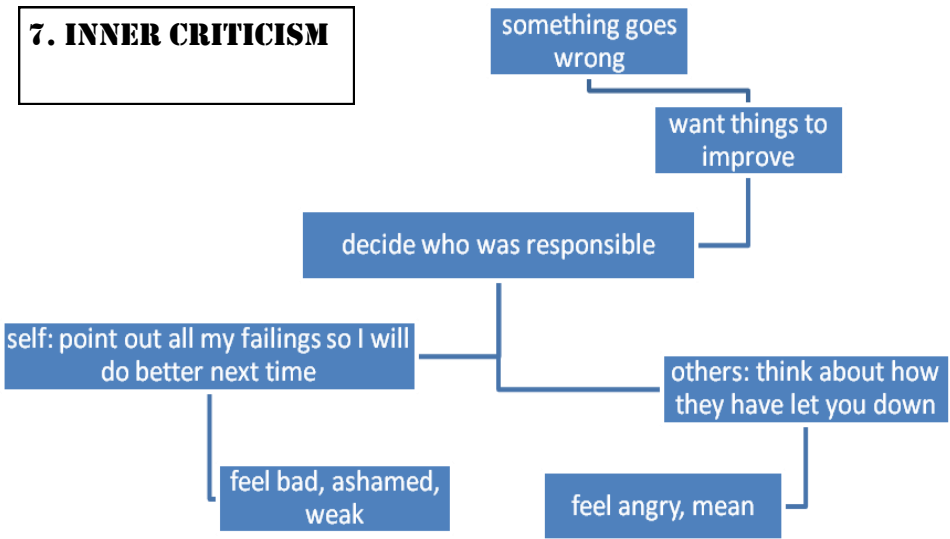
We have already seen that when bad things happen, we tend to ask why. Depression is no exception to this, so when someone has experienced depression they naturally enough ask themselves why: *Why did I get depressed?*

We also learn from an early age that others expect us to be able to provide reasons for our behaviour. They ask, *Why are you late? Why did you do this? Why didn't you do that?* And then, *Why are you depressed?* There can be pressure to come up with some answers.



It can feel helpful to have ‘good reasons’ to explain our depression to others. These reasons appear to justify being depressed. However, dwelling on reasons for depression may just make us feel worse. We may start to believe that depression is inevitable, which can make us less able to see, and therefore sometimes less open to, the

Criticism is often used to try to make people be better, do better. Much of the time, it is used with good intentions. For example, parents often criticise their children when they want them to do well, to succeed, to be happy. As we grow up, we learn to do the same to ourselves and others. Our inner talk may become full of criticism. In small doses this may be helpful, but what is the effect of too much negative criticism? Does it increase motivation and confidence? Does it help? Or does it do the opposite?



Inner criticism does nothing to change the outside world. It does, however, change our experience of living in the world.

How often do you think you get caught up in these different thinking habits?

THINKING PATTERN	rarely	sometimes	often
1. Why? (without finding an answer)			
2. Character analysis (what is wrong with me)			
3. Preparing the case for the defence (against imagined criticism)			
4. If only (things had turned out differently)			
5. I don't care (and here are all the reasons I am right not to care)			
6. Reasons to be depressed (which explain or justify the depression)			
7. Inner criticism (of myself and/or others)			

And what about these?

THINKING PATTERN	rarely	sometimes	often
8. Plotting (how I will get my own back)			
9. Comparing (who am I doing worse than? who am I doing better than? who is luckier than me? Etc.)			
10. Driving yourself hard (you <i>must</i> do this, you <i>must</i> do that, try harder, you can't take a break ...)			

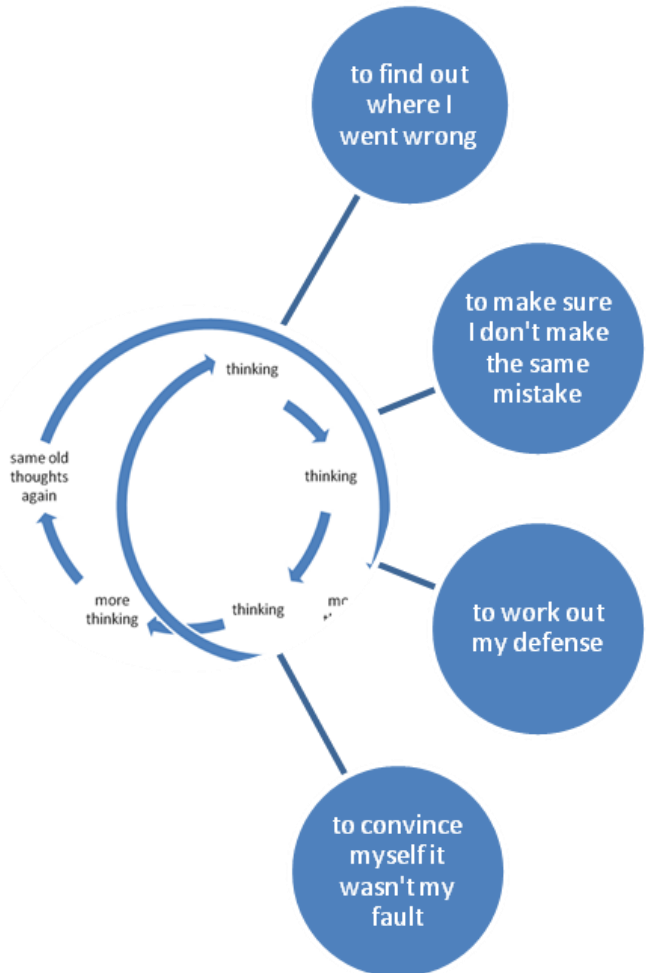
By the way, if you have said 'often' to quite a few, please try to avoid going back into 'why?' or 'what is wrong with me' etc. right now. Please don't ruminate about rumination! Also, remember, no-one is immune from these thought patterns. They do not mean that you are bad, or weak, or wrong, or

Why do we persist with unhelpful thinking when we aren't getting anywhere?

Usually the problems we are dwelling on are important to us, and it can seem important to figure them out. This means that sometimes people keep thinking about their problems because they are trying to get to an answer, to get a better understanding of what has gone wrong.

Therefore even if it is unpleasant to think about problems, we carry on because we believe it will help in the long run.

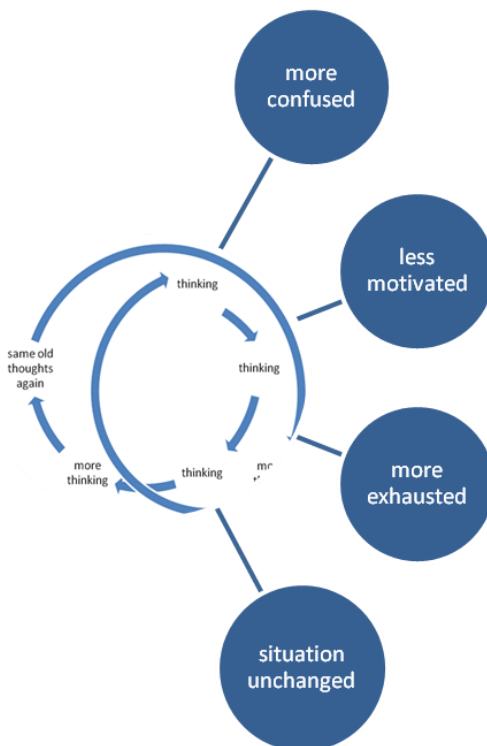
Here are just a few of the things that we might be trying to achieve when we keep thinking about problems.



Over time these patterns of thinking can become ingrained habits. When this happens, it is harder to notice and therefore harder to stop.

Sometimes we might notice the pattern but worry about what would happen if we stopped thinking in this way.

If we can't find an answer, or we don't like the answer we find, then it is all too easy to respond by just trying harder, and just end up more entangled and confused.



Before keeping your own record you might like to look at these examples.

DAY	THEME	WHEN
Monday	Why did my relationship end and why has it upset me so much and why can't I get over it like a normal person would (WHY and Self-criticism)	On and off all day but especially while watching TV in the evening and hearing music that reminds me of good times in the past
Tuesday	All the things that are wrong with my current situation (what is wrong with my job, what is wrong with where I live, etc.) (Reasons to be depressed?)	First thing in the morning
<i>Thursday</i>	<i>Whether I am up to my job or not (character analysis)</i>	<i>After getting some negative feedback from my boss</i>
Friday	Why didn't I say what I wanted to say to Rob? (IF ONLY)	All day when I wasn't doing anything else; it kept coming back into my mind

WHERE	HOW IT MIGHT SERVE ME	RESULT / COMMENTS
Mostly at home	I think I am trying to understand if it could have turned out differently and whether there is any chance of getting back together and making it work (but part of me knows there isn't really)	I felt very miserable; It makes me want to isolate and not see anyone
Lying in bed (not wanting to get up)	Not sure (possibly I am trying to find excuses for not doing anything)	Made me feel very down, I felt better when I finally got up
<i>At work</i>	<i>To find out, whether I should quit, or keep trying; and possibly also to try to not feel the horrible criticised feeling</i>	<i>This is pointless because I am not going to quit. It would be better to try to learn from the feedback but that is a bit scary in case I can't do it (which starts me off again!)</i>
Wherever I was!	I am trying to rewrite history. I don't want to accept that I made an idiot of myself.	It doesn't work! I can't change what happened.

One way to approach this is to make one entry each day. However, if you find it more helpful you could collect your examples over just a couple of days.

DAY	THEME	WHEN
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		
6		

Your rumination record

WHERE	HOW IT MIGHT SERVE ME	RESULT / COMMENTS

Learning from the rumination record

1. When and where did rumination happen?

Times of day?

Estimate of time each day spent ruminating?

Places?

Alone or with others?

Any triggers?

Rumination often happens if we have a lot of empty, unstructured time.
Was that the case for you or not?

.....
.....

Any other observations?

.....
.....

Any changes you could make to your routines to reduce the opportunities
for rumination?

.....
.....
.....
.....

2. When you were ruminating, what were you NOT doing?

Dwelling on problems can be a form of avoidance. It is as if we kid ourselves that we are tackling a problem, when in reality all we are doing is thinking about it (or wishing the problem didn't exist, or how it is overwhelming, or finding reasons for not doing it).

Look back at your record. If you hadn't been ruminating, what would you have been doing instead?

.....
.....

Do you have undone tasks, things hanging over you that are contributing to your rumination? If so, what are they?

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

Is ruminating helping you avoid? Does it make it harder to do the things you intend and want to do? Are there things you are missing out on as a result of the rumination?

.....
.....
.....

3. What were the main themes and patterns?

.....
.....
.....

Identifying the patterns and giving them a name (such as ‘if only’, etc.) can help us to step out of them. Did you notice this happening at all over the week?

.....
.....
.....
.....

4. Did ruminating feel important at the time?

If it did, did you get a sense of what it was trying to achieve? Sometimes people say the thinking is important because it is making sure they face up to reality, or don’t become complacent, or learn from their mistakes. Is anything like that going for you?

.....
.....
.....

Any other thoughts about how the rumination served you?

.....
.....

5. The consequences of the rumination

After ruminating what was your mood like?

.....
.....

Did you feel more at peace with yourself and the world?

.....
.....

Did you feel more or less able to tackle your problems?

.....
.....

Did you feel more or less optimistic about the future?

.....
.....

If there is an element of the thinking aiming to help you face reality, or avoid mistakes in the future, or understand yourself better, is that actually happening?

.....

If you are not sure about the consequences, you can always try it now.

- First rate your mood
- Then spend 5 minutes ruminating on one of the themes you identified.
- Now rate your mood again.

What did you observe?

A plan to tackle unhelpful thinking

We hope that having worked through the booklet this far, you now have a good sense of whether rumination is a significant feature of your depression. If it is, we hope you are also now able to describe what it is like and notice when it happens.

Becoming aware of these patterns of thought is the essential first step. However, ingrained habits take time to change, so this may be the beginning of a longer process.

Below are some suggestions of possible next steps. There are spaces for you to make notes of ideas you want to take forward. Do talk to your therapist or mental health worker about the support you might need to continue this process.

1. Reduce the opportunities

You may be able to do this by making changes to your routine. For example, if you notice that you are particularly inclined to ruminate while lying in bed in the morning, try getting up more quickly after you wake up. If specific events seem to trigger rumination (e.g. meetings at work), then plan an activity that doesn't leave much space for rumination as soon as possible after the trigger (e.g. you might arrange to see a friend after work).

Make a note here of anything you can do to reduce the opportunities for rumination:

.....

2. Spot rumination as early as you can

The more quickly we notice we're getting caught up in rumination, the more easily we are likely to be able to interrupt it, and the less impact it will have on us. Also rumination can become the sort of habit that takes hold automatically, before we have realised what is happening.

Therefore it is helpful to increase your awareness of your rumination patterns by continuing to keep a record. See how quickly you can spot rumination when it starts. You could also set an alarm to go off during a time of day when you often ruminate. Note what your mind was up to when the alarm went off.

.....

.....

3. Label the thinking as a way of letting it go

Once noticed, it is sometimes helpful to label the type of thinking as a way of helping to let it go. Possible labels include the types described earlier in this booklet, or what are sometimes called thinking biases. Here are some examples:

The image displays several thought bubbles, each containing a different type of thinking bias. The bubbles are arranged in two columns. The left column contains three bubbles: 'Catastrophising', 'Why oh why oh why', and 'Defending myself'. The right column contains three bubbles: 'If only', 'All or nothing thinking', and 'Character analysis'. Additionally, there are two bubbles in the middle-right area: 'Over-generalising' and 'Reasons to be depressed'.

Catastrophising

Why oh why oh why

Defending myself

If only

All or nothing thinking

Over-generalising

Character analysis

Reasons to be depressed

4. Be very clear about whether or not rumination is helping you

It is difficult to stop ruminating if something in you believes that it is important, that you should be doing it. If you find that your rumination has a very strong pull, **keep a record of the consequences**. Does it lead you to feel calmer, more motivated, more content, more at ease with life, more at peace with yourself?

You could also try **setting aside half an hour a day to ruminate** and observe when it helps by solving problems, or by leading to useful insights, etc. and when it doesn't.

An alternative is to try the **5 minute rule**: when you notice you are dwelling on a problem, keep going for 5 minutes. Then if it hasn't helped, do something else.

Ask yourself, is there some fear around that something bad might happen if you stopped? If there is, is there a way you can check it out?

.....
.....
.....

5. Tackle any underlying problems that can be tackled

Undone tasks hanging over us make rumination more likely. Making those telephone calls, paying those bills, etc. can really take a weight off your mind and reduce rumination.

You might want to revisit Booklet Five on avoidance and Booklet Six on problem-solving.

6. Make a list of activities to switch to when you notice rumination

It is particularly helpful to find activities that are absorbing and require us to use our minds in a different way.

- **Physical activity** can often do this, especially if it involves some effort (so walking fast may be more effective than walking slowly, for example).
- If you identified **‘flow’ activities** when doing Booklet Four, these are also likely to be very good antidotes to rumination. If the rumination is reasonably light, any change in activity or environment can help, for example, simply moving to a different room.
- If the thoughts have a very intrusive quality, and just keep coming back, be gentle with yourself. Try not to get into a struggle with your mind. See if you can allow the thoughts to be there in the background while you get on with other things.

There are more suggestions on the next pages.

Make your own list here

7. Express your feelings in a different way

Stopping rumination is not about suppressing emotions. In fact the opposite, because analysing problems intellectually can often block emotional experiencing.

You may find it helps to express how you feel by writing or drawing, or perhaps singing or dancing. Notice the difference between allowing yourself to feel and the kind of ‘thinking about’ which as we have seen leads into proliferation, making a big deal, self-analysis, etc.

What might you try?

.....
.....

If you tried this, how did you get on?

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

8. Cultivate new habits of mind

Sometimes it is helpful to direct attention to other aspects of our experience, aspects which we are probably not noticing if we are caught up in thoughts. For example, to get out of the thinking mind we can **pay attention to what we can hear, see, smell, feel**. There is always information flowing into the body from the senses. It gets easier to shift attention with practice, so attention training involves doing this deliberately for a few minutes at set times each day.

Mindfulness meditation is helpful in both noticing and letting go of unhelpful thinking. Ask your mental health worker or therapist if you want to learn more about this option.

When the time feels right, perhaps after depression has lifted, you might also think about ways of cultivating curiosity and interest, goodwill towards yourself and others, and so on.

.....
.....
.....

This famous Japanese haiku by Basho may capture something of a more helpful approach to life:

**The old pond,
A frog jumps in:
Plop.**

BEHAVIOURAL ACTIVATION FOR DEPRESSION

LIST OF BOOKLETS

1. Introduction to BA for Depression
2. Monitoring activity and mood
3. Roadmap: The Activation Plan
4. Finding direction: values, flow and strengths
5. Avoidance and the depression TRAPs
6. Problem solving
7. **Thinking habits**
8. Next steps

We hope you have found this booklet helpful. We welcome your feedback.

You can give comments to your therapist or by emailing us at slm-tr.SPTS@nhs.net or writing to us at Talking Therapies Southwark, Middle House, Maudsley Hospital, London SE5 8AZ.

www.slam-iapt.nhs.uk

TALKING THERAPIES SOUTHWARK

South London and Maudsley 
NHS Foundation Trust


Improving Access to Psychological Therapies

Revised February 2021

