

# Mental Health & Wellbeing at the Bar

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Rumination



Wellbeing  
at the Bar

# Rumination

One of our great strengths as humans is our ability to imagine. We can put ourselves into situations we have not yet experienced and visualise how it might be. However, this process can also be our undoing.

Rumination is the act of turning a thought, option or idea over and over in your mind. It can become obsessive in nature. It maintains our suffering long after the original issue may have occurred. There is often no solution or outcome to this behaviour and we may find our sleep disturbed and our concentration compromised as a result. Overthinking is tiring and frustrating.

Rumination should not be confused with worrying or concern which can be constructive if focused on reality.

For example, worrying about the lump we have found in our leg can motivate us to attend the GP, get a diagnosis and treatment (if necessary). This type of worry would become rumination if we found ourselves unable or unwilling to take remedial action by making an appointment with the GP whilst imagining the worst case scenario.

We often ruminate because we believe that by analysing our thoughts and finding reasons for behaviour (ourselves or others) we will arrive at a solution. The drive for answers is sometimes borne of a perfectionist tendency.

It may feel logical to resort to analysis when we feel things are going less well in life. Our tendency is to focus inwards in an attempt to find a solution to the issue we face. Barristers are experts in analysis, it is a skill that makes you successful. Under normal circumstances analysis helps you, your clients and the case. However, when you are feeling under stress, overwhelmed and anxious, rumination is a destructive activity.

A more helpful activity is to identify when our thinking is functional (preparing a case for court, planning weekly activity, knowing where and when to collect the children from after school club) and when thinking becomes unhelpful and/or repetitive.

## What are the risks?

The detrimental effects of over-thinking are well established through many years of psychological research. Peter Kinderman, clinical psychologist at University of Liverpool describes rumination as a 'maladaptive form of self-reflection'. His research analysing the responses of nearly 33,000 people from 172 countries found several negative outcomes of over-thinking.

- A distorted view of reality
- Unnecessary self-blame
- Pessimism
- Perpetuates sadness
- Impaired problem solving
- Reduced motivation
- Reduced focus and concentration
- Can be a factor contributory to obsessive compulsive behaviour and some [eating disorders](#)

## Are there any benefits of over-thinking?

The benefits of planning, problem-solving and other functional (or task focused) thinking are well documented. When this slips into rumination, there is very little compelling evidence to demonstrate that this is useful.

## Self help

Fortunately, we can do a lot to reduce our tendency to ruminate and to stop it in its tracks when it happens. Self-supportive tools include:

**Adopt a growth-mindset:** Do you tend to obsess about mistakes and errors? Research from Carol Dweck, a Stanford University psychologist identifies that we tend to have a preference to either be fixed or growth in our mindset. Those with a growth mindset see mistakes as setbacks and will view them as opportunities to learn and improve performance. A fixed mindset individual will be devastated by mistakes, will ruminate endlessly and takes no action to improve their behaviour.

**Awareness:** Become aware of your triggers for over-thinking (does it tend to happen when you lose a case for example or when someone makes a harsh comment to you?). Once you know what typically starts your habit of over-thinking, you can implement techniques to tackle it.

**Control:** Identify the things you can control in relation to your obsessive thoughts. Let go of the things over which you realise you have little or no influence actively list small steps (goals) you can conquer which will bring about a sense of ownership and control.

**Disengage:** A deceptively simple technique which involves acute awareness of our thoughts and actively stopping our engagement in them. Saying to ourselves (or aloud if alone) 'Stop! This is unhelpful thinking. There is no useful purpose to this'. As with all habits it takes repetition and conviction to embed.

**Distract:** Healthy distractions are an excellent way to stop rumination in its tracks. As soon as you notice thinking has become unhelpful or obsessive, find something else to occupy your cognitive processes. Movement is a great choice as it engages different brain function. It could involve taking a walk around the block or moving to a different area of the office and chatting to a colleague. If you are at home you might try taking the dog for a walk or indulging in your love of running, swimming, yoga or other physical activity.

**Do something attention grabbing:** This could involve an activity that engages you in 'flow' (a completely absorbing task) such as puzzles, crosswords, planning for that holiday you've promised your family or reading something technical (but not related to the case you might be ruminating about!).

**Forgiveness:** Is your over-thinking related to another person? Paul Gilbert researches the powerful impact that forgiveness can have. You may even have witnessed this in cases where victims have forgiven their attackers. Practically for some people, forgiveness can be a simple decision. For many of us it takes courage and considerable effort. A first step can be writing a 'letter of forgiveness' to the person who we perceive has wronged us. This letter does not have to be sent, and the act of expressive writing may be all that is needed to start a process of letting go. James Pennebaker has researched the positive impact of expressive writing for over 20 years. It is a proven technique that supports post traumatic growth following adversity.

**Schedule time to over-think:** Some people accept they have the tendency to over-think and will schedule time in their day (or week) to indulge in rumination. There is some evidence that this can be useful provided time limits are adhered to (for example, no more than 10 minutes a day). When rumination takes hold remind yourself that you have a slot in your diary to think, but it is not now.