Understanding rumination

What rumination is, how to tell it from problem solving, and ways to stop.

Rumination is going round the same thoughts again and again: why did this happen, what is wrong with me, why can I not just get on with things. It feels as if you are working something out. In fact you finish each round feeling worse and no further on.

Rumination

- Asks "why?"
- Abstract and general
- Goes round in circles
- Focuses on what is wrong with me
- Leaves me lower and stuck

Useful thinking

- Asks "how?" and "what next?"
- Specific and concrete
- Moves towards a decision
- Focuses on what I can do
- Leaves me with a next step

Why we do it

It seems as if understanding the problem should fix it. It can feel irresponsible not to think about it. And when mood is low, the mind keeps going back to dark topics.

The two-minute test

After a couple of minutes of thinking something over, ask:

1. Have I made any progress towards solving a problem?
2. Do I understand something now that I did not before?
3. Do I feel any less self-critical or low?

If it is no to all three, you are ruminating.

Ways out

- **Name it.** "I am ruminating."
- **Change "why" to "how".** From "Why am I like this?" to "How can I make the next hour a bit better?"
- **Get specific.** What exactly happened? What is the first small thing I could do?
- **Move.** Change rooms, go outside, do something with your hands.
- **Absorb yourself.** Pick something that needs your attention: a task, a conversation, a puzzle.
- **Notice your danger times.** In bed, in the shower, on the commute. Plan something for them.

> **Note**
> You cannot stop the thoughts arriving. You can choose not to keep going over them.

My notes and questions

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