

# **Breaking Free From Negative Mental Loops: Tools for a Clear Mind**

**By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.**

Rumination, worry, and mind racing are typical experiences that can negatively impact our mental health. Rumination is repetitious thoughts that focus primarily on the present and future. It usually involves negative thoughts and can gravely impact mental health and other areas of a person's life. It can progress to a point where it involves discouraged, dismayed, gloomy thoughts and feelings that color interactions with others. Looking at the world through gloomy-colored glasses, you are more likely to withdraw and disengage. Rumination is associated with depression, substance use, eating disorders, anxiety disorders, and PTSD.

Worry involves thinking repetitive, uncontrollable thoughts about something you feel anxious or concerned about. Worry is usually focused on anxiety about something that could happen in the future. Mind racing involves thoughts that occur quickly--one after another--that may or may not be related. Mind racing is also intrusive and uncontrollable and can be difficult to stop.

To reduce these negative experiences, cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) can be a highly effective strategy. CBT involves helping individuals identify and challenge unhelpful thoughts and behaviors in order to replace them with healthy ways to think and feel. It is a combination of cognitive and behavioral tools for helping clients identify and modify erroneous, limiting, or maladaptive thoughts and behaviors that interfere with quality of life and lead to impaired functioning.

Another strategy is mindfulness, which involves maintaining presence in the moment in a non-judgmental way, with increased awareness of self (thoughts, feelings, sensations), and the environment. It is effective in assisting people to reduce their emotional reactivity to thoughts, feelings, and behavior of themselves and others. Mindful self-compassion uses mindfulness to increase self-awareness and to respond with kindness and compassion for self-soothing and acceptance.

Other strategies to reduce rumination, worry, and mind racing include self-compassion, relaxation techniques, and healthy lifestyle habits. Self-care is one the best healthy lifestyle habits to practice. This includes getting enough sleep, eating a healthy diet, exercising regularly, and engaging in enjoyable activities. Implementing these strategies can produce positive results in a reduction of symptoms and improve one's mental health.

Thought-stopping is another cognitive-behavioral technique that has proven effective. Thought-stopping is the process of suppressing intrusive, unwanted thoughts to relieve distress. This technique aims to interrupt negative thinking patterns with redirection. The first step is awareness. Become aware of when you are ruminating, worrying, or mind-racing. At first, you may only notice them when you begin to feel overwhelmed. Once you identify that you are engaging in a destructive, intrusive thinking pattern, the next step is to stop it consciously and actively with a phrase such as "stop" or "no" to yourself or visualizing a stop sign or a red light. The next step is to replace the thought with something else, such as a positive thought or a calming memory.

To add the element of structure to your thought-stopping practice, carve out a specific time of day for worrying. Set aside 15 minutes every day at the same time to worry, ruminate, or mind race. Use an egg timer or some other timepiece with a second hand and an alarm to let you know that time is up. When the time is up, stop the mental gymnastics. During the day, when you find yourself worrying, mind-racing, or ruminating, stop yourself by "turning it over to your Higher Power," saying a prayer to ask for relief, or telling yourself that you will make a mental note to worry about that

tomorrow. Saying "STOP!" to yourself is enough to turn it around. While practicing a daily routine of thought-stopping, wear something on your wrist that you don't usually wear. When you interrupt your worry, rumination, or mind racing, rub your bracelet, watch, or rubber band to ground yourself in the present moment. After a short time of regular use of this technique, you should notice that you are ruminating, worrying, and mind racing less. After some practice, thinking of things to fret about in your worry time becomes difficult. Remember that it is best not to select a time right before bedtime.

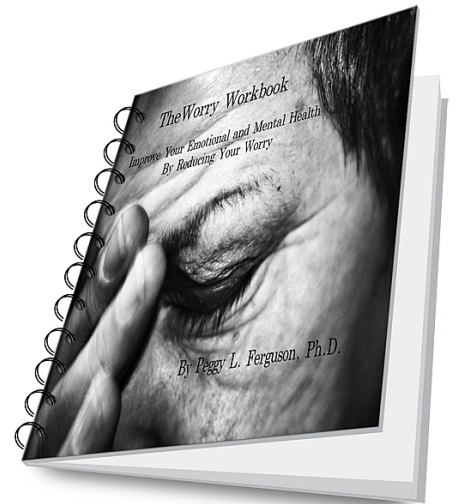
Practice these techniques daily until you're not worrying, ruminating, or experiencing racing thoughts during the day. Thought-stopping, carving out time for worrying, and grounding oneself in the present are practical techniques that can assist in reducing negative thought patterns that lead to rumination, worry, and mind racing. However, it is essential to note that thought-stopping is not a cure-all for your annoying, repetitive, intrusive thoughts. Instead, thought-stopping is a tool that supports mental and emotional health along with other cognitive-behavioral techniques and lifestyle changes.

For many people, practicing self-care constitutes a significant lifestyle change. Self-care activities include getting enough sleep, eating a balanced diet, exercising regularly, and engaging in enjoyable activities. It also includes setting boundaries and taking time to relax and reduce stress. Other lifestyle changes that can help include limiting caffeine and alcohol intake and engaging in activities that can reduce stress, such as yoga, meditation, and journaling.

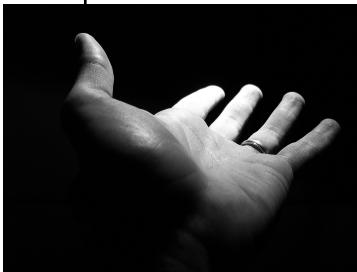
If worry, rumination, and mind racing become overwhelming, it is essential to seek professional help. A professional can support and guide you in developing strategies to reduce worry, rumination, and mind racing. In conclusion, worry, rumination, and mind racing does not have to ruin your day and threaten your mental and emotional health. Relief is achievable through cognitive-behavioral therapy, mindfulness, self-compassion, relaxation techniques, and healthy lifestyle habits. With practice,

consistency, and the right combination of strategies, achieving peace of mind and improvement in overall mental health is possible.

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