

One of the unintended consequences of rumination is that it often begins a downward spiral to a low point in our lives. Rumination is frequently used as means to attempt to manage anxiety or what are perceived as powerful 'negative' emotions. The spiral is downward because we find we cannot control our ruminations which make us feel helpless and powerless.

Often we believe the problem is our obsessive thoughts and we attempt various strategies to alleviate the distress caused by our thoughts. What we do not readily comprehend is that the rumination is a symptom of our distress and not the cause. To illustrate, consider this example from my own life.

Many years ago what was an important relationship to me ended. I was devastated, profoundly sad and filled to the brim with separation anxiety. Shortly thereafter, I began to get obsessed by my ex, at least at a cognitive level. By that I mean I could not stop thinking about her but it did not translate into anything physical, e.g. stalking.

When relationships end, particularly important ones, it is not uncommon for some rumination to occur as we try and understand what went askew. At times though, we get stuck and the rumination continues on and on relentlessly. The latter is what occurred to me.

In my mind I wanted the rumination to stop. I believed the problem to be the repetitive nature of my thoughts. I tried a few different strategies, some cognitive behavioral interventions, and some mindfulness mediation among others. Nothing seemed to work. I was still stuck in this pattern of rumination.

Things changed when someone said to me, the problem is not your thoughts; the problem is you're not managing your anxiety well. That made me see things in a new light.

Strictly speaking anxiety is not a primary emotion, rather it is a cover for deeper underlying emotions. It is a visceral form of emotional resistance to something which runs much deeper in psyche.

Where rumination is concerned it is a psychological defense which is hiding yet another psychological defense (acute anxiety). We can think of it as a type of layer upon layer of defenses. In terms of healing we want to deal as constructively as we can with the core issues driving the anxiety which in turn drives the rumination.

In my case it was feelings of unworthiness, shame, helplessness and a very profound grief.

Once these were dealt with, the anxiety eased and the ruminations stopped completely. But let's be clear, I did not do this on my own. At the time, I had enough good sense to realize that I needed some help and sought some counseling. It's been close to a couple of decades now, since I have ruminated in the same fashion.

One final note: At times I am a bit like a dog with a bone. My personality structure does have a bit of a compulsive/obsessive edge. I find that this obsessive side of my personality actually benefits me in that it can drive a lot of persistence. Often it has a way of getting things done which is particularly useful in life.

Rumination particularly the type that lasts for lengthy periods of time is an extreme. It's the extreme nature of rumination that makes it problematic. If you are experiencing difficulties with rumination please seek some professional there are good ways to deal with the problem.