

Overcoming Worry & Rumination Webinar Summary

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Educational / Information Purposes
Consult with a Professional

This should not be used as:

Advice
Diagnosis
Replacement for Therapy

Worry & Rumination:

Worry & rumination are very similar. Worry is often about the future. Rumination is often about the past and/or future. Worry often causes us feelings of anxiety and urgency. Rumination can bring similar feelings or also depressive feelings.

Signs worry/rumination is helpful:

- Leads to problem-solving
- Leads to productive action
- It's specific
- Time-limited
- Focused on things within your control

Signs worry/rumination is not helpful:

- Circular
- Does not lead to productive action
- Leads to action that reinforces worry/rumination
- Broad/not specific
- Consumes lots of time and energy
- Focused on things outside of your control

Thoughts

Automatic thoughts are normal. We can't control them. For example, try hard not to think about a pink elephant. The harder we try, the more likely we are to think of the pink elephant.

The Brain

Amygdala: The amygdala is in charge of keeping us alive. It's the fight/flight response. It achieves this by being geared to constantly overreact: "I value keeping you alive over being right."

- It does not learn from language. Only through experience.
- Haunted House example: We can't teach the amygdala by simply explaining to it the haunted house is not dangerous. We teach it by continuing to go inside despite the amygdala telling us not to.
- The amygdala is only open to learning new lessons when it's activated (sending anxiety signals). It can't learn if it's not activated.

Thinking Brain vs Observing Brain: The thinking brain is wild. It comes up with all sorts of concerning and weird things. A nickname for this is The Monkey Brain. Luckily, our brains have an incredible ability to watch themselves. This is the observing part. Moving into the observing part of the brain takes practice. And the more we practice, the easier it is to access. The goal is to move further away from participating in our thoughts and more into observing them. When we worry, we're often caught in the Monkey Mind. The goal is to shift to the observing side.

Cognitive Distortions: Our brains are constantly distorting reality. This is very normal but can be one of the major contributors to worry and anxiety.

<https://socialanxietycounseling.com/cognitive-distortions/>

The Anxiety Cycle

Triggering situation -> feeling anxiety -> Fear/worry thoughts -> Avoid/escape the "danger" -> Short-term relief -> Long-term maintenance of anxiety

If we are not in danger and do what fear/worry/anxiety urges us to do, we continue to teach the amygdala that its false alarms are accurate. As a result, we reinforce the anxiety cycle.

The way out is to do the opposite of what the amygdala is urging us. We increase short-term discomfort for long-term reduction of anxiety/worry. It's a paradox.

Changing Our Relationship to Thoughts and Anxiety

- We don't have control over automatic thoughts
- We don't have control over the amygdala

- If we focus on reducing anxiety and automatic thoughts, we are likely to remain stuck in the anxiety cycle
- Instead, focus on how we react and respond to unpleasant feelings or automatic thoughts
- By focusing on our relationship to thoughts and feelings, we are more likely to break the anxiety cycle.

Values

- Anxiety exploits what we value the most. If we don't value something, we don't worry about it
- Use worry as a reminder of what you value
- Worry keeps us only focused on avoiding harm
- It can be helpful to remind ourselves that anxiety is pointing us toward what we value:
 - “What if I embarrass myself on stage” -> “I hope I get the message across. I want to make a difference”
 - “What if my kids don’t grow up to be successful and happy” -> “I love my kids and I want them to be well”

Safety Behaviors

Safety behaviors are small acts we do to keep us "safe" from the "danger." These maintain the anxiety cycle because we inadvertently reinforce the unhelpful lesson that the situation is dangerous.

- Reassurance seeking
- Distractions
- Avoidance
- Excessive planning
- “Safety” objects, for example, carrying a bottle of water on stage "in case my throat gets too dry and then I can't speak"

Make the Worry Get Specific

“What if I get nervous at the party?” -> “What if I get nervous at the party and start sweating?” -> “What if I get nervous, start sweating, people think I’m crazy, reject me, and I live alone the rest of my life?”

Neuroplasticity

Thoughts are like water down a dirt channel. The more we think a certain way, the deeper the channel gets. When we worry/ruminate often, it becomes a well-defined river and becomes almost automatic for us. Luckily, our brains have the ability to make new

pathways. By thinking in new ways, we start pouring water in a new direction and slowly make a new channel. As we do this, the old one starts to die off.

Breathing/Calming Techniques

Breathing and calming techniques are helpful, however, we need to be aware of our intentions behind using them. If the intention is, "I need to calm down now because the feeling is not good and unsafe," we're likely to trigger the amygdala even more. A more helpful intention is using these techniques as something to engage in while you wait for the feelings to pass.

Other helpful tips:

- Less is more. Just like trying to go to sleep. The harder we try, the further we get away from the goal.
- Schedule "Worry time"
- Journaling worry thoughts to get them out of your head
- Patience
- Persistence
- Redefine success from "never having anxiety" or "never having worry/negative thoughts" TO responding to these uncomfortable feelings/thoughts in new ways.

Helpful Books

Overcoming Anxiety and Panic interactive guide (Overcoming Guide) by Elizabeth McMahon, PhD

Overcoming Unwanted Intrusive Thoughts: A CBT-Based Guide to Getting Over Frightening, Obsessive, or Disturbing Thoughts by Sally Winston, PsyD, and Martin Seif, PhD

Needing to Know for Sure: A CBT-Based Guide to Overcoming Compulsive Checking and Reassurance Seeking by Sally Winston, PsyD, and Martin Seif, PhD