
Rumination-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Depression

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From Edward R. Watkins

Handout 1. Key Facts About Rumination

What Is Rumination?

Do you ever find yourself dwelling on a problem over and over again without getting anywhere? Do you spend a lot of time thinking about yourself and how you feel? Do you get stuck thinking over why you feel depressed or reviewing your failings and mistakes? Do you often worry about things? Are you often asking, “Why me?” Do you find yourself recalling a series of negative memories, with each upsetting memory leading on to another sad memory? Are you constantly judging and evaluating yourself, checking up on how well you are doing things, focusing on where you don’t meet your expectations? All of these forms of repetitive thinking are what we call **RUMINATION**.

Rumination involves going round and round the same thoughts in your mind—getting stuck in an upsetting groove.

This handout explains why we want to reduce rumination and some of the important facts we know about rumination.

Let’s start by looking at your own experience of rumination. Spend a few moments reflecting on the effects that this kind of thinking has on you. Note down your answers to the following questions.

- Does it make you feel better or worse?
- Does it increase or reduce your energy levels?
- Does it increase or reduce the chances that you will get on with your plans and activities?

Effects of Rumination

Most people find that much of the time rumination makes them feel worse and reduces their motivation to do things. In fact, there is a lot of scientific evidence now that rumination is a major factor contributing to the risk of getting depressed and to the maintenance of depression. People who ruminate more tend to get depressed more often and for longer. Furthermore, we know that rumination makes people more negative and less effective at solving problems. Rumination is considered to be a central engine driving the depression forward.

Spend a few moments thinking about how different you might feel if you reduced all the thinking we described at the beginning of this handout—imagine how your life would be without all that rumination. **This is what we hope to achieve within this therapy—helping you to find better ways to knock out the rumination.**

Learning about Rumination

A good start to dealing with rumination is to know a bit more about it. Here are some key facts about rumination.

1. Rumination is a common and normal response to difficulties. We all ruminate about things some of the time. When there is a problem, it is natural to try and solve it, work it through, make sense of it by thinking about it. Indeed, thinking about things can be helpful, for example, look at how analysis has helped us to solve practical problems. Indeed, this way of thinking has led to many of the scientific and technological advances humans have made.

However, dwelling on problems can become unhelpful if you get stuck, and it goes on too long and does not seem to reach any kind of resolution—this is the kind of thinking we are focusing on when we talk about depressive rumination. One important thing we will do in this therapy is to try and find the difference between helpful thinking that leads to solutions to problems versus rumination that gets stuck and does not find a solution.

2. Thinking about problems and difficulties can sometimes be helpful and sometimes be unhelpful. The way that we think about things is important in determining whether we get stuck or solve problems. We will spend time in this therapy learning how to increase the more helpful style of thinking. Thus, the second thing to remember about rumination is that the style of thinking is important in determining how things turn out. In particular, people seem to get stuck in rumination if they try and think about **the wrong things**, for example, if they ask questions that are not answerable or if the balance of their thinking is not quite right.

3. Useful thinking about upsetting events and problems has a good balance between thought and action. For thinking about problems and difficulties to be useful, the balance between thinking and

action needs to be about right. If there is too much thinking that does not lead to action, then people often get stuck—just as it is unhelpful to have action without any thinking. Thinking is useful if it acts as a guide to action, and action then informs further thinking so that one feeds back into the other—however, if thinking becomes much more frequent than action or replaces action, then we end up with procrastination and avoidance, and problems are not solved.

Imagine that your car does not start. It is helpful to dwell on why it might not be starting and generate possible reasons for it not starting—problems with spark plugs, engine too cold, battery too low, and so forth—and thinking this through will help you to solve the problem. But for your thinking to be helpful you also need to actively investigate, for example, look under the hood, try different things—just thinking won't solve the problem. Likewise, just trying an action without dwelling on the problem probably won't solve the problem (e.g., repeatedly turning the key in the ignition). So, a balance is important.

Imagine the difference between asking:

Why isn't the car starting? How can I fix it? VS. Why is this happening to me?

What was the effect of asking these two different questions? Did you find that "Why isn't the car starting? How can I fix it?" helped to focus you on what was happening, how the car had been acting and how you might fix the problem?

Did you notice that "Why is this happening to me?" led you to focus more on yourself and perhaps think about the meaning of the car not starting (e.g., how inconvenient the car not starting may be or how things like this keep happening to me or that this is my fault)? Did you think about other bad things that happen to you?

In general we find that questions that ask "why?" and look at evaluating meanings are unhelpful, while thinking about how to fix things and get things done is helpful. We will focus more on this distinction between thinking about the concrete details and thinking about the meaning of events as therapy progresses, using your own experience to fine-tune your skills at this.

4. Rumination is a learned habit, and old habits can be replaced with new habits. Rumination is learned because it was taught to us, or because at some point in our past there was some kind of payoff or reward for ruminating. Many people who ruminate talk about how they learned to think like this from one or both of their parents. For some people, rumination may have been a helpful response during their childhood, even though it is not helpful anymore. For example, for someone with a very critical, easily angered parent, spending a lot of time dwelling on whether the parent is upset and thinking about how to get every- thing right might be a good strategy to avoid criticism or punishment. However, if overlearned and applied to other situations, this strategy could then become problematic as everyone's behavior becomes overanalyzed.

The main message is that any learned behavior or habit can be replaced with a new, more helpful habit—repeated attempts at doing different things can help us learn a new set of responses. Thus we can be hopeful about the possibility of changing the rumination habit. One of the first things the therapy will ask you to do is to keep a record of your rumination—this is designed to help make you more aware of this habit. Increased awareness of a habit is the first step in changing it.

Key Points

- Rumination is a major factor in causing and maintaining depression.
- Rumination is a normal and common response to problems.
- Rumination becomes unhelpful when the balance between thinking and action is lost.
- Rumination is a learned habit.
- This therapy will focus on unlearning unhelpful rumination and learning
- new habits of more effective thinking.

Things to Do

- Try to become more aware of your rumination using the rumination diary forms (Handouts 5 and 6) each week.
- Try to notice the differences between helpful and unhelpful thinking—look out for those times when your thinking helps to solve a problem or make a plan, and compare them to times when your thinking gets stuck and makes you feel worse. Compare the two situations and see what is different between them.

Handout 2. Avoidance

What Is Avoidance?

A common element that helps to maintain many people's depression is avoidance. Avoidance can take many forms, including:

1. Procrastination—putting things off, going over and over things in your head without making a decision
2. Trying to avoid thinking about upsetting or emotional events
3. Suppressing feelings
4. Not trying new challenges and not taking risks
5. Withdrawal from other people and hiding away
6. Giving up activities that you used to enjoy or be good at
7. Not being assertive or expressing feelings to other people
8. Preferring to think about things rather than doing things
9. Numbing oneself with drugs or alcohol

Spend a few moments reflecting on which of these forms of avoidance (or other types of avoidance not listed here) you might be using.

Use the lines below to write down the main things that you avoid. Try to be as specific and detailed as possible:

Key Messages about Avoidance

1. Avoidance is a normal response to threats and difficulties. It is useful for short-lived problems.

For acute or short-term difficulties, avoidance can be a very effective strategy. When faced with an immediate threat, such as being attacked, getting away and escaping is the most sensible thing to do. Likewise, when working on an important job, it may be useful to push away interfering upsetting thoughts until the job is finished. However, avoidance is less helpful when applied to longer-term problems that do not resolve themselves quickly.

2. Avoidance is less helpful in the longer term. There are several disadvantages to avoidance over the longer term. Avoidance leads to not coming into direct contact with an ongoing problem.

When you avoid facing the problem, there is no chance of fixing it, and it will continue, leading to more distress and difficulty. For example, not telling someone else about how they act in a way that upsets you is likely to lead to their behavior continuing, which leads to more distress for you.

Avoidance closes life down. Avoidance tends to spread out and generalize to more and more things, leading to a closed, not very fulfilled life. By trying to avoid bad things, we often curtail our activities so that there are fewer positive things as well. To avoid the risk of failure, a person stops doing things where there is also the chance of success, or of learning something new. Avoidance can expand and expand until there are very few activities where there is any chance of feeling alive or fulfilled, further fueling the depressed mood. To reduce depression, you need to open up your options and possibilities and introduce the chance of doing exciting and rewarding activities—avoidance prevents and limits this.

Your Own Experience of Avoidance

Reflect on your own experience of avoidance—while it may have helped in the short term to avoid pain and upset, have things in the longer term gotten better or worse?

Once you start avoiding things, have you noticed that the avoidance has increased or decreased over time?

Reducing Avoidance

- 1. Replace avoidance with approach—try new things.** It can be difficult to reduce avoidance. Avoidance has become a habit and feels safe. The fear of things getting worse or of failure and humiliation or of people responding badly makes it hard to try and change. However, this therapy will focus on reducing avoidance and replacing it with approach behaviors—on trying to embrace life and what you can get out of it, rather than trying to get through it with as little pain as possible.
- 2. Start by trying small steps first.** Identify things you used to do and enjoy and work on building them up first. **Break each task down into smaller manageable steps – don't try to do it all at once.**
- 3. Look at the pros and cons of avoidance.** For each activity you avoid, weigh up the advantages and disadvantages of not doing versus doing that activity. Will you feel better once you have done it rather than putting it off?
- 4. Focus on what is good about doing something for its own sake rather than whether you are doing it well enough.** A lot of avoidance is concerned with fear of not doing things well enough, of not being good enough. Instead of concentrating on the outcome of what you are doing (did it work or not?), as best you can, focus on the process of what you are doing—get absorbed in how you do it and focus on the intrinsic pleasure of doing it. For example, when playing sports you can focus on improving your technique and on the pleasure of taking part, rather than on whether you win or lose.
- 5. Remember that getting better at things takes practice.**

6. The anticipation of things is often more frightening than the reality. It is therefore useful to try things out and see whether they go as badly as you expected.

7. Good preparation can help make it easier to try new things. Imagining how something might turn out in advance can be helpful. Imagine as vividly as you can how you will feel when you do an activity (or how you used to feel when you did it)—this can help motivate you to do it.

8. Have a good routine. Doing the same activities at the same time and place can help reduce avoidance.

9. When planning to do things, it is useful to say when and where and how you will do them. For example, you might say, “I will go swimming at 10:00 A.M. on Saturday, and I will prepare my bag with my swimsuit and towel the night before.” Saying when and where you will do something makes it more likely that you will do it, rather than putting it off to do another day.

Things to Do

1. Look at your list of things that you are avoiding. Reflect on the pros and cons of not doing these things.
2. Keep monitoring your avoidance in the weekly diary record (Handout 5).
3. Choose one activity that you are avoiding and plan how to start doing it
4. again. The best activities to choose are those that seem easiest to get back
5. into and those that you know will improve how you feel when you do them.
6. Explore with the therapist how you can start on the new activity.

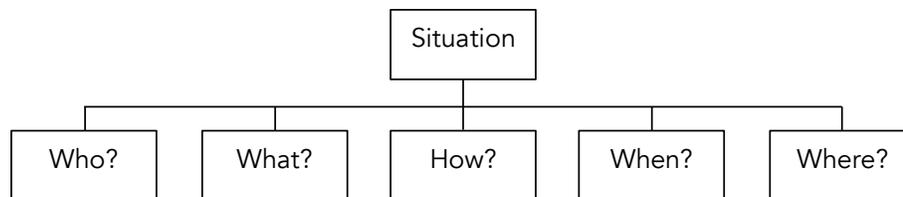
Handout 3. Goal Setting

When people are depressed, they often find it difficult to set goals for themselves. In particular, rumination can be associated with having **unrealistic or unattainable goals**. It is therefore important to consider carefully the goals you set for yourself.

When considering goals and plans, it is useful to use the mnemonic **SMART**, which stands for: **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable, **R**ealistic, **T**ime-Limited

Specific

The goal or plan is focused and concrete, broken down into small steps, and laid out in terms of how, when, where, and with whom you will do it.



Measurable

The goal can be described in sufficient detail in terms of what you would actually do so that you (and other people) can determine whether you did it or not. Making a goal measurable ensures that it is not too abstract. One way to make a goal measurable is to have a clear physical marker of the success you are trying to achieve.

It is better to avoid goals that involve the absence of an outcome (e.g., not failing, not upsetting people, not being depressed). Such goals do not have a clear point of completion. Rather, have goals that set out what you want to move toward and achieve.

Achievable: Can Someone Succeed at This Goal?

The goal needs to be achievable at some point. Goals that are impossible are not achievable. Ideally it should be something that could happen assuming that you had the skills and abilities to do the right thing. If the outcome is not likely to occur even if you do everything right, then the goal may be considered to not be achievable.

Goals are often not directly achievable because the goal or plan requires something out of your control to occur (e.g., for someone else to agree to a request when all the evidence points to the fact that they are not likely to agree to any requests, whether reasonable or unreasonable). In situations where one aspect of the environment (e.g., a particular person) is unlikely to provide the desired outcome, the goal may be usefully reframed by focusing on either changing the environment (e.g., leaving a relationship) or concentrating on other aspects of the environment (e.g., could someone else provide help and support?).

Realistic: Are You Ready and Able for This Goal?

Can you realistically do something to achieve the goal? Is it realistic for you to try and solve the goal right now? Assuming that the goal is achievable, do you have the skills, abilities, and background to succeed? Ideally, a goal should be just ahead of where you are now (i.e., a small step forward). If the goal is not immediately realistic, look for what stops the goal from being realistic and adjust it to deal with the obstacles, or set a new smaller goal to build toward that point.

Time-Limited

The goal or plan has a time sequence to be achieved and has a time set for when it will be implemented. Having a timeline is critical for focusing your plans to achieve the goal. It is useful to review the **SMART** mnemonic whenever your plans succeed or fail so that you can learn from your experiences and build on the more useful aspects of the **SMART** approach for future situations.

Goal Conflict

It is also useful to check whether any of your goals are in conflict with each other, as having conflicting goals is a good way to get stressed and start ruminating.

For example, to want people to do things properly and to want to never disagree with people are likely to be goals that are in conflict.

If any goals are in conflict, it is useful to weigh up the goals, consider their advantages and disadvantages so as to prioritize one of them, and to put one of the goals first.

Handout 4. Self-Monitoring

An important aspect of this therapy approach is self-monitoring of rumination and avoidance, so you can practice spotting them as early as possible. Self-monitoring is an important part of therapy because both rumination and avoidance are automatic habits that happen without thinking, so that they can often happen without you noticing.

Key Aspects of Self-Monitoring

- 1. The first step in changing a habit is to notice that you are doing it.** Once you are aware of the habit and when it happens, then you can start to change it. Much of what we will do in therapy depends on you noticing your thinking—without awareness it is almost impossible to change a habit.
- 2. The more often and the earlier you spot a habit, the better.** The longer avoidance or rumination continues, the worse it gets, the harder it is to stop, and the more it becomes learned, strengthened, and automatic. Conversely, the more you can spot it, the more you are aware of it, the less habitual it becomes, and the weaker it becomes. Likewise, the earlier you can spot the early signs or triggers for dwelling on negative things, the earlier you can stop it, and the earlier you can replace the rumination with a new response.

Spotting rumination as early as possible and then intervening as quickly as possible also has the benefit of extending the period of time without rumination. Furthermore, if you repeatedly use a new response when the early signs for rumination occur, then these triggers become linked to the positive response, rather than to the rumination. Thus, there are many advantages to becoming more aware of the triggers for rumination. Becoming more aware of the early signs will help you to “nip rumination in the bud.”

- 3. Look out for warning signs of rumination and avoidance.** When trying to spot rumination and avoidance, it is important to notice the signs and triggers associated with the onset of these behaviors. Recognizing these early warning signs gives you further points where you can intervene and introduce new, more helpful responses instead of rumination.

Triggers can include:

- Feelings and emotions (e.g., feeling sad, angry, or anxious)—paying attention to your facial expression, posture, and internal sensations can help you to notice changes in your emotions.
- Physical sensations (e.g., tiredness, pain, tension, headaches).
- Thoughts and images (e.g., imagining a negative experience, making a comparison between yourself and someone else).
- Behaviors (e.g., confronting someone).
- Cues in the world around you (e.g., going to a particular place, a time of day).
- How other people act toward you.

When looking for cues to rumination and avoidance it is useful to consider all of these different possibilities.

4. Hunt for clues. It is useful to take a “**treasure hunt**” approach, where each week you search for earlier and earlier cues to rumination and avoidance. Keep asking yourself, “What new, earlier cues did I discover this week?” **The earlier you can spot the signs that you are about to ruminate or avoid a situation, the more you will be able to stop the rumination or avoidance. To do this, I recommend that you keep looking to see if an earlier sign can be identified.**

5. Use the tracking forms. The therapy builds self-monitoring into the plan between sessions by asking you to complete the rumination tracking forms, noting down key episodes of rumination and avoidance and how frequently they occur.

These forms, which you fill in every week, are designed to help you become more aware of rumination and avoidance and their triggers. It is important to complete each form each week—every session we will review the forms to see how self-monitoring is going and to see whether any new signs are being observed.

Key Points

1. The first step in changing a habit is to notice that you are doing it.
2. The more often and the earlier you spot a habit, the better the outcome.
3. Look out for warning signs of rumination and avoidance.

4. Hunt for clues.
5. Use the tracking forms.

Things to Do

1. Complete a rumination and avoidance tracking form each week (see Handout 5).
2. It may also be helpful to keep and update a list of signs and cues noticed (a trigger/sign list).

Handout 5. Tracking Rumination and Avoidance

Name: _____ Date completed: _____

It will be very helpful if you can keep a record of how much you are repeatedly thinking about, dwelling on, worrying about, or being preoccupied by your feelings, past upsetting events, current problems, and things about yourself or the future. We call this "rumination." Also keep track of how much you avoid things (e.g., not asserting yourself with other people, not going certain places, not trying new or difficult activities, not following through with plans, withdrawing from activities, procrastinating about things). It would really help if every week before the therapy starts you complete the following questions, which will help your therapist to understand how much you are dwelling on negative things.

- In the last week, what percentage of time were you repeatedly dwelling on or preoccupied with negative thoughts about an upsetting issue, event or problem, from 0, not at all, to 100, all the time? _____ /100
- In the last week, how much control did you feel you had over this repeated worrying, from 0, no control at all, to 100, totally in control of it? _____ /100
- In the last week, how much did the dwelling on negative things interfere with your plans or stop you from doing what you wanted, from 0, no effect at all, to 100, completely stopped me from doing everything I wanted? _____ /100
- How long did the worst period of rumination last? (circle one) minutes / hours
- How long did the rumination last in total across the whole week? (circle one) minutes / hours
- In the last week, how often did you avoid or put off doing things, from 0, none of the time, to 100, all of the time? _____ /100

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- In the last week, how much control did you feel you had over your avoidance— how much could you control whether you did something even if you did not feel like doing it—from 0, no control at all, to 100, totally in control? _____ /100
 - In the last week, how much did avoiding things interfere with or stop you from doing what you wanted, from 0, no interference, to 100, completely stopped me from doing everything I wanted? _____ /100

Handout 6. Rumination Episodes Recording Form

Fill in details about **TWO** episodes when you worried or dwelled on something upsetting **Each Week**. Use the form below. This information will help the therapist to understand what you are bothered about and how to help you. By **“rumination”** we mean repeatedly thinking about, dwelling on, worrying about, or being preoccupied by your feelings, past upsetting events, current problems, things about yourself, or the future. For each example, please note when it happened, what happened just before it started, how you felt before, how long it lasted, what it was about, what effect it had on you, and what stopped it. Don’t be concerned about how you are filling in the form—there are no right or wrong answers and spelling, grammar, and neatness are not important—the form is just a way of gathering helpful information about your thinking.

Date	Time	What happened just before the rumination started?	How did you feel before?	Duration	What were you thinking about?	What were the consequences of rumination—for mood and actions?	What stopped the rumination? What did you try to stop it? Was it useful?

Handout 7. Antecedent–Behavior–Consequence (ABC) Form

This ABC form is designed to help spot the warning signs and effects of rumination. Identify a recent example of when you ruminated and then fill in the boxes below, answering the questions within each box, initially with the help of your therapist.

Antecedent	What precedes B? What triggers B: event, feeling, thought, person, place, time, activity? Determine context: where?, when?, who?, what?, how? <hr/>
Behavior	What you did: the target behavior to understand and increase or decrease. Provide details on how the behavior occurs (e.g., content and style of rumination). <hr/>
Consequence	What is the consequence of B—positive/negative, short-term/ long-term, for self, for others—on valued goals? What effect does it have? What does it increase/decrease? What are its pros/cons? What does it avoid? What would happen if you didn't do B? What is the effect of not doing B? What would you be doing instead? What has the consequence of B been in the past? <hr/>

Handout 8. Being More Effective

Becoming more effective in thinking and actions involves learning to direct your thoughts and actions so that you can be more successful at achieving your desired goals. We have already seen how **rumination often involves thinking that does not lead to helpful action**—learning to be more effective will reduce rumination.

Remember too that we have observed that you can think about problems in different ways:

- 1. Sometimes thinking about problems is helpful and solves the problem, making you feel better.*
- 2. Sometimes you can become stuck, ruminating over and over in a way that just makes you feel worse, without making any progress.*

We are going to focus on how you can learn from your own experience to increase the helpful thinking while reducing unhelpful thinking, and reduce rumination.

The key to being more effective is to use your own experience to learn what works and then change your thinking and behavior for the better.

Learning from Your Own Experience

Being more effective means learning what works and what does not work. Being more effective involves learning as much as we can from our own experience—by paying attention to what worked and what did not work in the past, and noticing the differences between these situations.

We all learn from our own experience to get more effective. Look back over your life and think of skills that you have gotten better at. Consider how you have learned both from your successes and your failures.

Depression and rumination can reduce the ability to learn from experience. When people are depressed, they tend to not notice changes and to think that everything stays the same and cannot improve, making it hard to learn from success and failure. Likewise, rumination involves a tendency to look at the similarities across situations and see common and general abstract themes across different events, often relating to personal inadequacy, such as "I am a failure." During rumination, one negative thought or memory is often linked with other negative memories, rapidly leading to a spiral of negative memories.

To be more effective, you need a systematic approach that fights off the effects of depression and rumination. We call this approach "functional analysis," and it is an approach you have been practicing with your therapist.

Key Aspects of Functional Analysis

*Pay Attention to Change: Look Out for Differences between Situations
and How Things Change across Time*

Noticing that sometimes we succeed and sometimes we fail and looking for what is different between success and failure is a key step in altering our thinking and behavior to become more successful. Deliberately looking out for how situations and actions vary is important to overcome the sense that nothing changes, which is often produced by depression.

For example, imagine that Jill wants to do some important writing (deal with bills, catch up on letters, get on with work, etc.) but finds it difficult to start and keeps putting the job off. Jill then starts to dwell on not getting it done, feeling down on herself and thinking "Why can't I do this?"

To be more effective, Jill could reflect on whether there have been differences in how well she has been able to get her writing done on different occasions. In fact, she remembers that there have been times when she has gotten going on her writing quite well and times when she has found it more difficult.

Looking at the differences between those times we can see the following:

GOOD AT WRITING

- Jill has a tidy space away from distractions.
- Jill is focusing on the step by step details of what she is doing.

BAD AT WRITING

- Jill's writing area is a mess.
- Jill is focused on evaluating how well she is doing—will the writing be good enough?

So, to find writing easier, Jill may need to plan to work in an undisturbed place and to focus on each item she is working on one at a time rather than checking up on her performance

Differences in the world around us, how people are thinking, and what people are doing can all determine whether thinking about problems is helpful (problem solving) or unhelpful (rumination).

Consider what happens when you start thinking about a problem. Think of a time when you thought about a problem and reached a plan or decision quickly, within 15 minutes.

Remember the situation as vividly as possible. Note down what you were doing, what you were thinking, where you were, and how you approached the problem.

Now, think of a time when you thought about a problem and found it difficult to reach a plan or decision, going over and over the problem for hours and hours without success. Remember the situation as vividly as possible. Note down what you were doing, what you were thinking, where you were, and how you approached the problem.

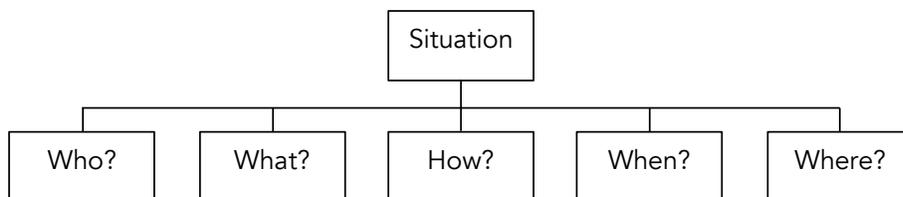
What was different between the two situations? How were the problems different? Was the way that you thought about them different? What can you learn from this experience?

Pay Attention to What Is Unique about Each Situation: Note the Particular Circumstances

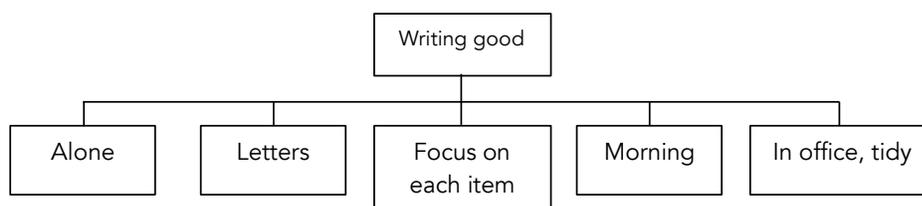
Every attempt at thinking and action occurs in a different context and set of circumstances—a unique and different combination of what you do, how you do it, when you do it, where you do it, why you do it, who else is involved, your physical and mental state, the conditions in which you do it. Fully describing all these elements is essential to learning what factors influence success.

For example, Jill needs to remember the details of each time she tries to write in order to notice what differences there may be between when she is effective and not effective.

A quick review of useful questions:



For Jill, these questions might provide the following information:



Focusing on the particular, unique aspects of a situation works against the tendency of rumination to generalize one situation to many situations. It is more useful to think “I failed because I was tired and unprepared” than to think “I am a failure.” The explanation that involves information specific to the situation is less general and gives clues as to what to do next time to improve performance.

Notice the Consequences of Any Action

Does the action have any benefits or rewards that increase the likelihood of doing the action again? What purposes does the action serve? Understanding the consequences of an action can determine whether it is useful (does it get what I want?) and whether there are alternatives (are there other ways to achieve the same ends?).

For example, for Jill, putting off writing may be a way to avoid a situation that involves judging herself. To get back to writing, Jill may need to find a way to write without always evaluating herself. Yet, when Jill does write she begins to feel more in control and more productive.

Practicing Functional Analysis

For each situation, thinking about differences, particular circumstances, and consequences will help to produce a more useful view of what might be going on, reduce rumination, and guide future plans.

We have a specific form to help—the Being More Effective Form. Handout 9 is an example of a blank form. Look at the form and consider how you would use it. Your therapist will discuss with you how to use this form day to day.

Over time, a collection of these forms will provide information about what increases the chances of helpful thinking and useful action. This information can then be used to make better plans.

Key Points

1. Being more effective means learning what works and what does not work.
2. We all learn from our own experience to become more effective.
3. Depression and rumination can reduce the ability to learn from experience.

4. Therefore, to be more effective, you need a systematic approach that fights off the effects of depression and rumination. We call this “functional analysis.”
5. The key aspects of functional analysis are:
 - Pay attention to change**—look out for differences between situations and how things change across time.
 - Pay attention to what is unique about each situation**—note the particular circumstances.
 - Notice the consequences** of any action.

Things to Do

1. Complete the *Being More Effective Form* regularly as a response to difficulties and warning signs for rumination and avoidance.
2. Review what is learned as you complete a number of these forms. What approaches are more helpful than others? Change how you handle situations in response to this information.

Handout 9. Being More Effective Form

Complete this form after every success or failure. Use the questions below the form to complete each column and then note down your plan/decision.

Detailed questions	Current situation ^a (success/failure) (e.g., intended to do something and did it).	Similar situation with opposite outcome ^b (failure/success) (e.g., intended to do something and did not do it)
What? Include goal, events, actions, feelings, physical state, outcome		
Where? Location, setting, state		
When? Time, day, what preceded the situation		
How? Step by step how the event unfolded, your approach during the situation		
Who?		

^aWhat was unique about this situation? Describe in detail the context of the event in response to each question. Was the event a success or failure?

^bDescribe a similar situation or task that had a different outcome (e.g., success or failure), and that happened either this week or earlier. How do the situations differ? What can you learn from this?

Plan/decision for the future:

Handout 10. Engaging with Life through Concreteness

Not Connecting with Experience

Depression often makes it hard for people to fully connect with experience, to fully *engage* with life. You can be doing something you might usually enjoy but not feel anything, or feel disconnected. You can be physically present but not mentally or emotionally there. For example, you could be talking to a friend or playing with your children but not feeling anything. You're there but you're not there—you are not *fully* attending to or connecting with experience.

Spend a few moments reflecting on those times when you don't fully connect or attend to the experience of what you are doing—those times when you are not fully there. These might be times when you feel a bit numb, or when you feel spaced out, or a bit distanced, or when you feel like you are going through the motions. Use the lines below to write down some examples of times when you have not fully experienced what you are doing.

Try to be as specific and detailed (concrete) as possible:

Effects of Not Connecting with Experience

Let's start by looking at your own experience of not fully connecting with activities or other people. Spend a few moments reflecting on the effects this has on you and note down your answers to the following questions.

Does it make you **feel** better or worse?

Better Worse

Does it increase or reduce your **energy levels**?

Increase Reduce

Does it increase or reduce the chance that you will carry out your **plans and activities**?

Increase Reduce

Depression and Not Connecting with Experience

Not being connected to experience contributes to depression in two main ways:

- If you are not connecting with experience, then you don't get the benefit of doing something enjoyable—you can do something that would normally be rewarding or pleasurable, but it does not make you feel better. Thus, whatever you do, your mood will not improve.
- If you are not connecting with experience, you are not able to notice what is going on around you, notice any changes, or learn from success and failure. You are likely to keep repeating the same mistakes again and again, since there is no chance of realizing what you could do differently.

Abstract thinking and Not Connecting with Experience

Both **rumination** and **overgeneralization** contribute to not being able to connect directly with experience. When someone is ruminating, her mind is full of thoughts going round and round about her problems, and she is not really attending to what she is doing. Likewise, when someone is jumping to conclusions from an event and thinking about what it might mean about his future and him- self (overgeneralizing), he is moving away from the direct experience of what is happening and moving into **abstract** thoughts *about* the experience. Too much abstract thinking can stop you from connecting with experience and prevents the benefits of directly connecting with the world around you.

Avoidance and Not Connecting with Experience

We can also lose connection with our direct experience because we are trying to avoid thinking about upsetting or emotional events, trying to avoid unpleasant feelings, or avoiding new challenges or risks. By trying to avoid threats or possible failure, we often reduce our activities, resulting in fewer positive experiences as well. To avoid any risk of failure, you might also stop doing things where there is at least a chance of success, or of learning something new. Therefore, avoidance can increase until there are very few activities where there is any chance of feeling alive or fulfilled, further fueling the depressed mood.

Avoidance can close life down, shutting out the chance of fully experiencing life. While this might be a way to reduce the risk of experiencing more pain, it also makes it hard to fully connect with all the good things in life. To reduce depression, you need to open up your options and possibilities and introduce the chance of doing exciting and rewarding activities—avoidance prevents and limits this.

Reconnecting with Experience

The way to reconnect with experience is to directly attend to what you are doing and to the world around you. A good way to do this is to focus your attention on an activity that you find interesting and in which you can become completely absorbed and immersed. You can do this via a mental exercise that re-creates the experience of being absorbed in an activity.

You can also reconnect with experience by deliberately increasing the activities that you find interesting and absorbing. When they are depressed, people often drop the activities that excite and absorb them, while carrying on with the chores and duties they feel they should do. The consequence of this is that you can end up doing all the dull and effortful activities that you find tiring and draining but not doing any of the interesting and fun activities that make you feel better and give you more energy. It is important to get the balance between chores and duties and positive activities right, because the former drain your batteries while the latter recharge your batteries. This means that if you are doing too many chores and not enough fun, engaging activities, you are going to wear yourself out.

Absorbing Activities

The kinds of experiences we are looking for are those where you feel completely absorbed, immersed, or caught up in the process and details of what you are doing; where you lose all sense of self and time; where you experience things coming together naturally without much conscious thought; where there is a deep and effortless involvement in the activity, a merging of action and awareness and a sense of being completely focused in the present moment. Such absorbing experiences are sometimes described as “flow” experiences or peak experiences—people who play sports refer to being “in the zone.” Critically, such experiences involve concrete thinking, since attention is focused on the details of the task and on sensory experience, as you concentrate

on the process and sequence of what is happening. Even more important, such experiences are a very strong antidote to rumination, overgeneralization, and inactivity, and act as a powerful antidepressant.

Different people find different activities absorbing. Absorbing activities can include doing something creative, musical, or artistic, focusing on the natural world, participating in sports, dance, or other challenging physical activities, and taking part in activities that involve intellectual stimulation and learning.

Specific examples include sensation-seeking, high-adrenaline activities like rock climbing, scuba diving, horseback riding, surfing, or sky diving, where you are completely focused on the experience of what you are doing (e.g., focusing on where to put your hands next when rock climbing).

Or absorbing activities could be creative activities like painting, where you are focused on the patterns of light and dark, the differences in color and texture on the canvas, and where you sense you should put the brush next.

Activities You Find Absorbing

There is no right or wrong way to become absorbed. Try and think of memories of when you have been completely absorbed in an activity. Use the lines below to write down several examples of times when you have been fully absorbed in what you are doing. **Try to be as specific and detailed (concrete) as possible:**

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____

Common Themes in Absorbing Activities

As you look at these different examples, you might find that there are some elements in common between them. *Positive* absorption is more likely to occur under particular conditions, many of which are under your control:

- There is a balance between the challenge (difficulties and opportunities) of the task and your skills—if the task is too difficult, it is hard to get absorbed, but if it is too easy it will be boring. Ideally, you need to try tasks that are within the reach of your skills while slightly stretching you.
- Your attention is focused on the task at hand—the more you attend directly to what you are doing, the more absorbed and connected you become.
- The activity involves a narrow temporal focus—your attention is focused on the immediate, present moment, on what is happening in the moment right now, rather than on the past and the future.
- There are clear goals, rules, and immediate feedback. It is easier to get absorbed when you know what you are trying to do and for every action you take there is an immediate and direct response—for example, when playing a musical instrument, you immediately hear what note was played; when painting you can directly see the effect of the brush on the canvas.
- The activity is rewarding in itself—what you are doing is valued as an end in itself because the *process* of doing it is interesting, rather than because of what you might achieve as a *result* of doing the activity. For example, playing a sport might feel good as you are doing it because of the feeling in your body, whether you win or lose.
- There is a focus on discovery, learning, growth—you are doing the activity out of curiosity, to see what happens or to learn and improve.
- The activity is consistent with what you value—it reflects what is important and meaningful to you. For example, if you appreciate the natural world, then you might find walking in the country and paying attention to nature absorbing. If you value learning and curiosity, you will be find activities that involve learning more absorbing, for example, learning to play a musical instrument.

Your Examples of Absorbing Activities Are an Important Starting Point

The examples you listed above provide memories you can use for **the mental exercise of imagining and re-creating absorbing activities**. During these mental self-help exercises, you will imagine one of these absorbing situations as vividly and as concretely as you can. You imagine that you are there right now, looking out onto the scene, seeing through your own eyes, experiencing the sensations of being in your own body, using all of your senses to become fully aware of your experience in the moment. You can use these exercises to get yourself into a frame of mind where you are more directly connected to experience, in order to practice this skill and as a means to fully experience what you are doing. In addition, the state of mind you have when you are absorbed makes you more motivated to do things and makes it easier to fully experience what you are doing and get more enjoyment from it. It can therefore be helpful to practice the absorption exercise to get yourself into the right frame of mind before starting an activity, to increase your chance of getting started and to increase your enjoyment of what you are doing.

Your examples give you clues as to activities that you can find absorbing and beneficial. Take a look at the examples you listed. How many of these activities have you stopped doing or are you doing less frequently? Write down which of these activities that you would like to do more often below:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Choose one of these activities and plan how you would start doing it again over the next few weeks. Note down the steps of your plan here:

- Step 1. _____
- Step 2. _____
- Step 3. _____
- Step 4. _____

Often people find that making a written commitment increases the likelihood that they will do something. Are you happy to commit to your plan?

I, (insert name) _____, commit to (insert activity) _____ at
(insert time) _____ on (insert dates) _____.

Signed: _____ Date: _____