The Rumination Cure

7 WAYS TO GET RID OF THOSE REPETITIVE NEGATIVE VOICES IN YOUR HEAD

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A beautiful thing
is never perfect

More about the Author

I began my happiness journey over 16 years ago when I found myself lying on the couch at 3 in the afternoon, still in my pajamas, unable to get up. Depression had taken over my life. And for all of you who have been depressed, you know that it robs you of your ability to truly engage in your life.

One day I decided I would go see a psychologist. As I sat and talked to him, I recognized that he was helping me reframe my thoughts. He was training me in new ways of thinking. After a few months of therapy I would emerge happier…but then life would send me another blow and I'd be back in his office for a tune up. I realized that I needed to know what he knew. I mean if cognitive behavioral therapy is a cure for depression, why didn't they teach stuff like that at school?

I was on a mission to learn more about how to fight my depression and maintain my happiness regardless of what was going on in my life. I finally discovered that there actually was a scientific study of well-being, happiness and human flourishing and it was called **positive psychology**.

What was different about it was that it was all based in real research being conducted in universities around the world. It wasn't based on someone's thoughts or opinions about happiness. I quickly became fascinated with the study and knew that I was called to complete my Master of Applied Positive Psychology alongside the founding father of positive psychology, Dr. Martin Seligman in 2009.

I read 6,000 pages of research, applied everything to myself and never became depressed again.

I am not a trained or registered psychologist, but I have the tools and strategies to keep myself grounded and out of a depression. I also found myself reaching higher and higher levels of flourishing…And then the greatest thing of all happened…

I wasn't afraid to go and do the things I wanted to do! I finally had the courage to live the bigger life I wanted for myself!

In 2012 I founded the Canadian Positive Psychology Association with a handful of kindred spirits and we now spread the work worldwide about positive psychology. We have people from all around the world come and speak to share their knowledge. It is truly inspiring to be a part of it all.

Over the years I have facilitated thousands of people towards greater flourishing both at work and in their personal lives. I deliver programs to teach coaches and counsellors what I know. I deliver programs to the general public to help them flourish. I teach resilience programs to teachers, students and parents in schools. I speak at conferences and act as a guest speaker for countless organizations and associations who want to know more. I work with practitioners and help them share their knowledge with each other so they can learn and grow in their practices.

My work has been featured in Forbes, The Globe and Mail, Toronto Star, Huffington Post, Canadian Living Magazine, Live Happy Magazine, Chatelaine, Psychology Today, Women's Agenda, Toronto Sun, to name a few. I am a contributing author to the European Handbook of Positive Psychology, Positive Psychology at Work and Positive Psychology News Daily. And my new book: *Wire Your Brain for Confidence; The Science of Conquering Self-Doubt* is available on Amazon.

I love what I do because I can see how it transforms people's lives. I hope, in some small way, this little e-book transforms yours.

DISCLAIMER

Please note that much of this publication is based on my personal journey and the scientific research in positive psychology. Positive psychology is a relatively new field of scientific study and researchers are learning new things every day. The research shows that scientifically tested interventions in positive psychology are effective means to improving our well-being. But just because it works for the majority of people studied, it doesn't mean it will be effective for you. Just like taking aspirin to resolve a headache works for most people, it may not work for you.

Although I have made every reasonable attempt to achieve complete accuracy of the content in this publication, I assume no responsibility for errors or omissions. Also, you should use this information as you see fit, and at your own risk. Your particular situation may not be exactly suited to the examples illustrated here; in fact, it's likely that they won't be the same, and you should adjust your use of the information and recommendations accordingly. Nothing in this publication is intended to replace psychological counselling or therapy, legal, medical or other professional advice, and is meant to inform you, the reader.

Try these approaches and see how you progress. Some may work better than others for you, only you can decide.

Why I am WRITING This Book

I used to be a big time ruminator. I think I could have qualified for the rumination Olympics if there were such a thing. My ruminations would last for days after even the mildest incident. Worse, my ruminations were accompanied by visions of self-harm. Yes, I actually had mental pictures of pounding myself on the back every time I made a bad move. It was an all-body experience. I'm embarrassed to admit it, but it is true.

Even when things went well I focused on tiny things that went wrong. I robbed myself of any satisfaction for a job well-done. I felt pretty confident during the day, but at night I would overthink everything, experiencing the same repetitive thoughts over and over again. I questioned what I did, what I said, what I should have done differently. Repeated negative thoughts deprived me of happiness and stopped me from shining in the world. I knew there were things I wanted to accomplish in this lifetime, but I continually sabotaged my efforts. I could not be fully present with my family after work because my repetitive thoughts clouded my thinking.

For me, rumination started very young. I lived with a well-intentioned loving mother who was also extremely anxious and over-protective. While I'd like to blame my mother for all my problems, the rule is you can't do that once you hit 30. So I have to admit, I don't know how or why I started to ruminate so much. I didn't even know that I was doing it. Rumination had become an automatic way of being for me, and I had no idea how to release its grip on every aspect of my life. After I became an adult and suffered several hardships including four miscarriages, I fell into a deep depression. Ruminating did not help. In fact it made my condition worse.

According to recent research, women are more likely than men to use rumination as a response to distressing circumstances. They focus inward on feelings rather than outward on taking action to change their situations. Several long-term studies show that people who ruminate in response to stress have an increased risk of major depression. Rumination impairs the ability to solve problems, keeping people stuck in negative thoughts and emotions. It is no surprise that no matter what country you live in, no matter what ethnic background you have or what your ethnicity is, women are twice as likely as men to experience major depression.

Thankfully I got help. I went to see a psychologist. After several sessions, I could see that he was teaching me new ways of thinking. I knew then that I had to learn what he knew so that I could free myself once and for all from these depressive thoughts. I was not going to allow my overthinking to

run my life. I had too much I wanted to do. I made the choice to retrain my brain. It took me a few years to do it, but I can truly say that the ruminations are gone.

Did you hear me?

The ruminations are gone.

I am finally free.

And you can free yourself too.

That is why I am writing this book. When I tell people, especially women, that I do not ruminate anymore, at first they look at me astounded, almost like they thought life without ruminating was not even possible. Then their astonishment turns to curiosity and they want to know "How did you do it?" and "Can you teach me?" If you have the same negative repetitive thoughts, I am writing this book for you. I want to share how I freed myself once and for all in the hopes that it will help you live a happier life – one that leads you in the direction of your most desired dreams.

Now I could have chosen a compelling title like "Banish Ruminations in 7 Easy Steps," or "Stop Ruminating in Just 4 Days." I really wish it were that easy. I'll be honest with you. Ruminating is an insidious behavior. If you've been thinking this way for years, it will take you years to think differently. But I promise that if you work at it, you will see changes in your life. You will begin to retrain your brain, and soon your automatic thoughts will turn positive. It is possible. It has been worth the effort. A life free of ruminations is a much happier and more confident life. It is amazing what I have been able to achieve and feel without my ruminations. If I can do it, you can do it too.

Each strategy I will show you is a practice. It is not like taking a pill and voila it's all done. A practice needs to be practiced regularly. Just like diet and exercise, you can't just say, "Oh I ate well in February so I'm good for the rest of the year." Or "I did a ton of exercise in April, I'm good." It is a

daily practice, but it doesn't take extra time in your day. You still have the same number of thoughts, but their tone changes. You will be shocked and surprised to wake up one day with no mean voices in your head talking back to you.

Let me tell you.

That is a glorious day!

So let's begin...

WHAT IS *Rumination?*

I thought I would begin by defining rumination so you know exactly what it is I am talking about. According to the late Susan Nolen-Hoeksema, expert psychologist at Yale University and the most well-known rumination researcher, "…rumination is a mode of responding to distress that involves repetitively and passively focusing on symptoms of distress and on the possible causes and consequences of these symptoms...people who are ruminating remain fixated on the problems and on their feelings about them without taking action." Rumination is typically negative and involves the process of insistently focusing on feelings and problems.

In simpler terms, rumination is when you overthink about a situation or life events and think about them over and over again. The constant repetitive nature of rumination is what keeps you stuck in the problem.

Some people ask me how rumination differs from worry.

Researchers have found that worry generally involves negative thoughts about things that are out of a person's control. Worry is an attempt to problem-solve about a situation where the outcome is uncertain and possibly negative. It's usually about something you are fearful about.

Rumination and worry are very similar in that they are both repetitive, persistent forms of thought that are self-focused. Both are associated with and worsen depression and anxiety. They differ primarily in their time orientation. Worry is usually about a future event or situation and focused on anticipated threats. Researchers find that even if worry is a result of a past mistake, usually the focus is on how this will impact the future. Worry helps people feel that they are prepared for threats and allows them to take appropriate action.

Rumination usually involves thinking over and over again about *past* situations, wondering why they happened and trying to determine what they mean. People engage in rumination because they think it will help them figure things out. Unfortunately, this is far from the case.

6 Reasons WHY YOU NEED TO Stop Ruminating Now

If you delve into the research on rumination, you will discover it has many harmful consequences that will rob you of your well-being, happiness, and confidence. Research shows that there are 6 harmful consequences of rumination:

1. RUMINATION LEADS TO DEPRESSION.

People who engage in rumination when in stress suffer longer periods of depression than other people, with an increased likelihood of developing a more serious disorder over time. Further evidence now shows that rumination is also associated with anxiety, binge eating, binge drinking, and self-harm.

2. RUMINATION MAKES YOU A BAD PROBLEM SOLVER.

It does this by making you think more negatively about the problem than perhaps is the case. It also destroys your confidence in any solutions that you may come up with. Rumination can create a lens that makes you appraise problems as unsolvable, and thus you may fail to come up with any effective solutions at all. If you are a ruminator, even when you generate a good solution, rumination may stop you from implementing it. In one study participants prone to rumination expressed less confidence in solutions they had generated to complex problems, asked for more time to work on the solutions before they committed to them, and were less confident about their solutions.

3. RUMINATION GENERATES MORE NEGATIVE EMOTIONS.

When you are feeling bad and in the grips of negative emotions, it is more likely that you will try to understand your current situation through that negative lens. Some studies have shown that when depressed participants are prompted to ruminate they:

A	**Can recall more negative memories from their recent past**
B	**Think that negative events have occurred more frequently in their lives**
C	**Talk about troubling problems instead of more cheerful topics**
D	**Are more negative, self-critical, and likely to blame themselves for their current problems**

This ‘lens’ of negativity is like wearing a set of glasses that taints how you see everything in the world.

4. RUMINATION KILLS YOUR MOTIVATION TO HELP YOURSELF.

Because rumination keeps your focus on your depressing thoughts, it may convince you that you lack the ability to solve your problems or improve your mood. Several studies show that even when people knew the activities that will improve their moods, ruminators were reluctant to engage in them. In one study cancer patients delayed going to the doctor more than 2 months longer than their non-ruminating counterparts.

5. RUMINATION KILLS YOUR CONFIDENCE.

Imagine you are trying to learn a new skill or take your performance to a higher level. Repetitive negative thoughts about past performances interfere with your ability to have a positive focus on the next performance. Your ruminations precede your next performance, putting you in a negative mood, which detracts from your ability to be at your best. This then affects your next performance, and a downward spiral ensues.

6. RUMINATION MAY CAUSE YOU TO LOSE FRIENDS.

Over time, friends and family members become frustrated with your continued need to talk about your problems, especially when it occurs for months after certain life events. Ruminators are perceived less favorably by others. They are seen as dependent, clingy, aggressive, and having a desire for revenge. This is especially problematic since social support is one of the most effective resilience strategies for handling tough times.

Now that you can see why it's so important to stop ruminating for good, let's talk about what you can do about it.

7 Techniques TO HELP YOU Stop Ruminating Now

1. CHANGE YOUR SELF-TALK

This is the critical first step to ending ruminations. Because ruminating is usually a reflection of a past event, what you say to yourself about that event is important to your success. You need to learn how to reframe the way you look at things in your life. This goes back to understanding what your core beliefs are about yourself, your self-worth, and your own talent. Much of what you say to yourself stems from what you think of yourself and your level of self-esteem.

If you believe you are useless, untalented, and undeserving of love, you reinforce those beliefs with what you say to yourself in your head. So it begins with you. You must begin to love yourself at a deep level to believe that you are worthy of love from others and that you deserve to have good things come into your life. Many people I speak to know that it is important to love themselves first, but they claim they have no clue about how to change their views of themselves. Here is a simple technique that can help you begin to rethink your own beliefs and change them once and for all.

First of all, I want you to picture yourself going about your day. As things happen to you, good and bad, you are talking to yourself in your head – either positively or negatively. I want you to now personify those voices. Picture them coming from a person following you around who is saying these things to you. Every time you hear that voice in your head, picture that person saying it. If you can write down what that person is saying, do it. The more you become aware of what that voice is saying, the easier it will be to change the voice.

Researchers have discovered that there are common ways of thinking negatively that can lead to depression and anxiety. These are commonly known as cognitive distortions, but to simplify, I will call them the stories people tell themselves. David Burns, in his amazing book on this topic, *Feeling Good,* describes these distortions in detail. I have summarized them below. It is important to know your stories so you can begin to change them. Here are several different types of stories that people tell themselves.

BLACK OR WHITE THINKING:

If your performance is less than perfect, you see it as a complete failure. You might have received a 96% on a test, but because it was not at 100% or the best in the class, you tell yourself the story that it was a complete failure, despite the fact that 96% is an excellent grade.

MENTAL FILTER:

One thing is going wrong in your life, but you focus on it so much that your vision of reality becomes distorted. For example, if you're going through a divorce, you might now see every daily experience through this lens. All day long you tell yourself the story that every occurrence is as a result of the divorce.

DISQUALIFYING THE POSITIVE:

You dismiss positive experiences by telling yourself the story that they don't count. In this way you can maintain a negative belief even when it is contradicted by positive experiences.

MIND READING:

You arbitrarily conclude that someone is reacting negatively to you, and you don't bother to check it out. You are telling yourself a story about what the person is thinking about you when you actually don't know at all.

THE FORTUNE TELLER ERROR:

You predict that things will turn out badly and you tell yourself the story that your prediction is an established fact. For example, a friend of mine who was frustrated with his job search stopped sending out resumes. "What's the point? Nobody's going to contact me anyway."

MAGNIFICATION OR MINIMIZATION:

You begin to catastrophize about things and tell yourself a story about the worst that could happen. Or you inappropriately shrink things like your own good qualities.

SHOULD STATEMENTS:

When you use the words should or shouldn't in your stories, you are really saying that your performance or your circumstances are not at the standard set either by everyone else or by yourself. This standard is influenced by the way you compare yourself to others. The emotional

consequences are guilt and feelings of inadequacy. When you direct should statements toward others, you feel anger, frustration, and resentment because people are not living up to your expectations of them.

LABELING:

This is an extreme form of overgeneralization. Instead of describing your error, you attach a negative label to yourself: “I’m a loser.” When someone else’s behavior rubs you the wrong way, you attach a negative label to him: “He’s a jerk.”

PERSONALIZATION:

You tell yourself the story that you are the cause of some negative event or the reason why someone treated you so poorly, when in fact you had nothing to do with it. For example, when the cashier at the grocery store is rude to you, you may ask yourself, “What did I do to deserve that?” when it actually has nothing to do with you.

Can you recognize the kind of negative stories you engage in most? Most people have one or two favorites they engage in on a regular basis. Now, as you imagine this person following you around, listen to what she is saying. (Let’s pretend it’s a woman but you can also pretend it’s a man.) Try to define the stories she is telling you. Is it black or white thinking? Is it fortune telling? Should statements? The more you can understand exactly what your voices are saying to you, the easier it will become to change. Now that you have awareness of what your voices are saying and you have analyzed the type of negative thinking you engage in most regularly, it is time to ask that person, let’s call her my mean coach, to stop following you around. Yes, her contract is up, and it is time for her to go. You have done some interviewing and you have decided to hire another person to follow you around. Let’s call her, my friendly coach. She is much more positive, supportive, and compassionate. Still strong and constructive, but positive. You base the job description on all the qualities of your best and most compassionate friend.

Now your mean coach is pretty stubborn and will not stop talking for quite a while. Your friendly coach doesn’t mind. It gives her something to do. For now, your friendly coach will challenge everything that comes out of mean coach’s mouth. As you do this, you will become more and more aware of all the rotten things coming out of your mean coach’s mouth and be more compelled to

allow her to leave.

Let me give you an example: Your 10-year-old daughter is taking longer than usual to get ready for school on a morning when you have to leave right on time to make it to work for a very important presentation you are giving to your boss and other higher ups. You feel the stress, and your patience is low. At this moment you should be in the car, but your daughter is still in her bedroom. You run upstairs to see what is taking so long, and she is still in her pajamas and texting her friends. You lose it, yelling at her to get ready right now. She starts crying and locks herself in the bathroom.

Your mean coach is ready with, "You're such a bad mom for yelling like that," or "If anyone heard you, they would know what a horrible fake you are," or "You're so stupid. Now you've made it worse. You'll be late to work, and your boss will have canceled the meeting in disgust."

Luckily your friendly coach is here to challenge the stories put forth by your mean coach.

MEAN COACH: "You're such a bad mom for yelling like that."

FRIENDLY COACH CHALLENGE: "Wait a second, are you a bad mom? I don't think so. I think you are a really good mom. I don't know if you handled this situation well by yelling, but that doesn't make you a bad mom overall. You can try to do better next time. You don't need to label yourself."

MEAN COACH: "If anyone heard you, they would know what a horrible fake you are."

FRIENDLY COACH CHALLENGE: "You are not the only mother who has ever lost it at times like these. Given the fact that you have this really big presentation today, it's understandable that you are low on patience. I think people would sympathize with you, and they have probably done things like this themselves! Besides, how do you know what people would say? You really have no idea. You are mind reading."

MEAN COACH: "You're so stupid, now you've made it worse. You'll be late to work, and your boss will have canceled the meeting in disgust."

FRIENDLY COACH CHALLENGE: "You're not stupid. You're a pretty intelligent person. Yelling may have made it worse, but you can begin now to fix this and get your daughter off to school. Even if your boss is annoyed, he'll be waiting for you. Even if he isn't, there will be another opportunity. You don't need to catastrophize or to label yourself."

See how this works?

Every time your mean coach says something, your friendly coach is there to challenge. At the beginning, it is not your job to silence your mean coach. She will stick around for a while. It is your job to ensure the new friendly coach is challenging everything your mean coach says. Your friendly coach has to be relentless. Practice this religiously, every day. One day you will notice a shift. You will notice that your mean coach is not around as much and your friendly coach is the only one following you around. Then your friendly coach can do more encouraging than challenging.

Imagine now that your friendly coach is the only person following you around, everywhere you go and after every bad thing that happens. All you hear is a kind, compassionate, supportive voice that encourages you to do your best. Imagine what life would be like. Really, imagine it. After a while, I just didn't hear my mean coach anymore. She disappeared.

For years I had a mean coach following me around everywhere. One day I had a revelation. If I really had hired a coach like this who said all these horrible things to me, I would have kicked her to the curb after just an hour. If my spouse, friends, or acquaintances spoke to me like that, I would have left them too. I would not have tolerated it. Yet I tolerated it from myself for decades. Why was that okay? Who the hell did I think I was?

Fire the mean coach.

Do it now.

2. PUT YOURSELF ON A DIET OF POSITIVE EMOTIONS

When you are trying to lose weight, you put yourself on a special diet of good healthy food and try to stay away from salt-and-vinegar chips and chocolate cake. It is the same when you are trying to lose the ruminations. Negative emotions can spark a downward spiral for ruminators. When people are experiencing a negative emotion such as anger, sadness or frustration, it is more difficult for them to release the grip of repetitive thoughts, and it is harder to shift into thinking more positive thoughts. Just like a person with diabetes cannot afford to indulge in sweets all day long, ruminators cannot afford to indulge in unnecessary negativity. This means you need to manage your positivity ratio closely. Look at all the emotions you experience during a day. Your positivity ratio is the number of positive emotions divided by the number of negative emotions.

I first heard of the concept of a positivity ratio from Dr. Barbara Fredrickson, a leading researcher in the area of positive emotions when she gave a guest lecture at the Master of Applied Positive Psychology program I attended at the University of Pennsylvania. She found that people with higher positivity ratios were more likely to flourish. Really low positivity ratios actually correlated with feelings of depression. I first started monitoring my ratio in 2008, with the intent of increasing it every day. The results were incredible. My mood was better, my energy was much higher, and my confidence went way up. Fredrickson's research shows that positive emotions broaden our thinking and build important physical, social, and psychological resources that actually fuel greater productivity and motivation.

The first step in increasing your positivity ratio is to become aware of your emotions throughout the day. What do you do every day that brings you moments of positive emotion? What do you do that brings you moments of negative emotion? I started to make note of the things I did that brought joy, love, contentment, serenity, interest, and laughter into my life. I also made note of the things I did that brought sadness, anger, disgust, fear, shame and disappointment.

Actions that brought me positive emotions included expressing gratitude, petting and walking my dog, watching ½ hour of my favorite sitcom that always makes me laugh out loud, savoring my morning shower, calling a close girlfriend, hugging my children, eating healthy food, doing hot yoga, working on stuff I love, and being kind to my Starbucks barista. These were not huge things. They were just little things that brought moments of positive emotion into my day. Once I was aware, I started to find ways to bring more positive moments into my day.

On the bottom side of the ratio, I started to notice that I engaged in a lot of unnecessary negativity that brought me down. For example, if a guy cut me off on the highway I would think about it over and over again, I would come into the office and tell people about it, I'd think about it even as I went home that night. Ruminating over these minor negative incidents certainly brought my ratio down. But I also found that I would watch scary shows on TV like Murder Mysteries that were usually about the brutal murder of a woman. I loved watching that show because it was so fascinating, but I also found that the brutal murders were scary, and I'd think about them even after I went to bed.

The key is not to avoid all negative emotion. I don't think that's possible or healthy. I mean if your daughter is being bullied at school, it's natural to feel angry as you take steps to deal with it. If a friend has just been diagnosed with cancer, you will feel sadness as you go to lend support. It's not about avoiding the negative. It's about letting go of the unnecessary negative. Easier said than done when you're a ruminator! So that's when I turned to the wisdom of my very dear friend David Pollay.

I read David's book, The Law of the Garbage Truck; How To Respond To People Who Dump On You And How To Stop Dumping On Others, and it changed my life. David taught me how to recognize the people that were acting as garbage trucks in my life, regularly dumped their garbage on me. Once I recognized it as garbage, I was able to choose not to engage in their negativity. I no longer allowed them to affect my day. I would say, "That's their garbage, not mine." I also started to recognize the garbage I was creating for myself. I encourage you all to read that book. It may change you just as it changed me.

Now that I've introduced the positivity ratio, it's time to put it to work.

POSITIVITY RATIO CHALLENGE: TAKE ACTION TO INCREASE YOUR POSITIVITY RATIO

Become aware of the things that bring you positive moments in the day. What are things you already do to bring moments of joy, laughter, gratitude, love, serenity, and awe into your life throughout the day? Write them down. Think about ways to bring more of them into your daily routine.

Become aware of the activities that bring unnecessary garbage into your life. Write them down. Make a commitment to yourself that you will no longer engage in them. As you flip through the channels of possible experiences, when you get to something that will make you feel sad, blue, angry, frustrated, upset, alarmed, or disappointed, you can choose to switch to another channel.

Try this for two weeks and report back to me by emailing me at louisa@louisajewell.com. I want to know more about your experience with your positivity ratio.

Of all the things I learned in positive psychology, this one strategy has dramatically changed my daily experience in life and significantly helped me to manage my mood. By putting myself on a positivity diet, I put myself in the right mood to avoid ruminations.

3. THE ELASTIC TECHNIQUE

Researchers have found that distraction can be a good technique to stop ruminating. In one study they found that even positive distractions of only 8 minutes can help people stop ruminating. When you begin ruminating, you begin an endless loop of repetitive thoughts. Because ruminations are negative, they increase negative emotions. The trick is to use a pleasant distraction to lift your mood and remove the negative cloud over your head.

Some people suggest using an elastic band on your wrist to snap yourself out of a ruminating sequence and then turn your attention to more pleasant thoughts. I learned to have a good thought ready when I find myself snapping the elastic on my wrist. Perhaps your go-to thought might be picturing a good friend or that perfect trip to Mexico or your daughter's lovely wedding. Whatever thought or memory that can instantly put you into a positive state of mind will work. For me, it's picturing Brad Pitt.

Another form of distraction is to do something fun and positive. For example, if you find yourself ruminating, perhaps go for a walk in nature, call a good friend, or watch a funny clip on YouTube. By putting yourself in this positive state, you strengthen your ability to stave off rumination because you are diverting attention away from your negative mood. People often ruminate in an attempt to sort things out in their minds. Putting yourself in a positive state of mind makes you a more effective problem solver. I interviewed Dr. Sonja Lyubomirsky, a leading happiness researcher who has studied rumination extensively. In her research she found that people often turn to rumination as a problem solving strategy. If that is the case for you, her suggestion is to postpone your problem solving until you are in a good mood. Negative emotions can lead you down into the black hole. By problem solving when you are in a better mood, you have a much higher likelihood of finding an effective solution.

4. PRACTICE SELF-COMPASSION

This practice is critical to ending your ruminating. I have been practicing self-compassion for over 10 years, and it has dramatically changed my life. Often ruminations involve people beating themselves up over things that have happened throughout the day. When you are compassionate to yourself, you build up rather than beat up. Over time, you ruminate less because you don't need to beat yourself up. According to self-compassion researcher, Dr. Kristin Neff, self-compassion works very much the same way as compassion for others does, just turned on yourself. Neff describes three elements of self-compassion:

1. RECOGNIZE YOUR OWN SUFFERING WITHOUT SUPPRESSING IT.

When things go wrong, people often just go into problem solving mode without acknowledging how hard things might be. For example, if your husband leaves you for another woman, stop and recognize how incredibly difficult this situation is before you start thinking about what you're going to do next. Understand that being sad is normal in a situation like this. Don't suppress your sadness. Take the time you need to feel the full range of feelings the situation brings.

2. BE KIND, CARING, AND COMPASSIONATE TO YOURSELF.

Say kind words to yourself. Speak to yourself just the way your best and most compassionate friend would speak to you about this situation. When you hear those negative ruminations coming on after you've been triggered by something, stop and ask yourself "Wait! What would my best, most compassionate friend say to me right now?" Begin to say those things to yourself instead.

3. UNDERSTAND THAT WHAT IS HAPPENING TO YOU IS NORMAL AND PART OF THE HUMAN CONDITION.

Neff questions, “Why do we think something is wrong when bad things happen?” Bad things happen to everybody. It’s normal. When my husband left me and wanted a divorce, I found great comfort in knowing that millions of incredible women had found themselves in exactly the same situation. I, in fact, knew many amazing women who had been through a divorce. There was nothing wrong with me.

Now some of you may argue that being self-compassionate does not allow you to take a good look at your behavior to improve next time, but in fact the research shows the opposite. When people are self-compassionate, they are more likely to engage in behaviors that help them improve future performance. Neff says people can still be constructive self-criticizers, just without beating themselves up destructively. For example, when my husband left, I still asked myself, “What went wrong?” “What could I have done differently?” “What have I learned that would improve my future relationships?” “How much of this was in my control?” I can still take a critical look at myself without destroying my self-esteem. When you behave compassionately to yourself, you stop the cycle of rumination that can bring you down, especially when things are going horribly wrong.

Often when I teach self-compassion to participants in my workshops, there is someone who begins to cry. People cry because they have, for the first time, come to realize how hard they are on themselves. If this is you, it’s time to give yourself permission to treat yourself with kindness and love.

Make a decision to start now.

You deserve it no matter what.

5. SET THE RIGHT EXPECTATIONS

I asked my daughter several days before our holiday to go out to the shed, get her suitcase, and begin packing. I was working while she was on spring break, so she had full days to get this done. Each day I asked her if she had found the suitcase, and each day she said, “Oh I’ll do it tomorrow.” As the days went by, I found myself increasingly frustrated with the fact that she was not packing for the trip in advance. I thought, at age 14 she was old enough to do her own packing and help out with the preparations for the trip. Finally on the day when we had to leave for the airport at 12:30pm, I got a call at 10am from my daughter saying that she could not find the suitcase. Not any suitcase. I could tell she wasn’t disturbed because she expected me to come home and fix the missing suitcase dilemma.

I rush home after a final interview at work with one hour to spare only to find that indeed, there was no suitcase for my 14-year-old daughter to use. Luckily my husband found an extra carry-on bag, so we fit her clothes into two carry-ons. This caused problems at the airport as one carry-on was far too heavy to be taken on the plane, so we found ourselves with suitcases open on the floor revealing our underwear and bras to everyone in line, trying to juggle things out of one bag and into the other. It was infuriating.

Thinking back, I realize that I created all of this. You see, I thought that at the age of 14 my daughter ‘should’ be more responsible. I knew she was putting it off until the last minute but I still kept her responsible. Sometimes you purposely set expectations on others, and when they fall short, you feel aggravated, angry, and frustrated. It’s like the expectations you set for Mother’s Day. You have an idea of what ‘should’ happen and if people fall short, you are disappointed, angry or sad. I obviously knew the consequences of not preparing in advance far better than my daughter did, and I knew I would be affected much more than she would if things did not work out well. By setting a high expectation for my daughter who was clearly not as motivated as I was to do things the right way, I set myself up for aggravation down the road.

I could have just gone to the shed myself to find the luggage. When none was found, I would have had lots of time to buy a piece of luggage well in advance of the trip. By recalibrating your expectations, you can avoid disappointment in the future. I'm not saying that a 14-year-old shouldn't be responsible for getting her own clothes packed. I'm just saying that if you expect she will do it, you may be disappointed and frustrated.

Here's a new technique that can help you avoid bad feelings. Tell people your expectation. Before mother's day comes, let your kids and/or spouse know what you expect for mother's day. This will make it easy for them to fulfill your expectations and you won't be disappointed. I could have said to my daughter "If you don't have the suitcase packed by Monday at 5pm, I'm going to go out to the shed, get the suitcase myself and pack for you." This would have provided all the motivation she needed to get it done, considering no 14 year-old wants their middle-aged mom packing for their trip to Mexico! You will avoid all those days of ruminating in anticipation of her 'not' packing her own bag.

6. SEPARATE YOUR SELF-WORTH FROM YOUR ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Often when people reflect on their self-worth, they reflect on their accomplishments. They compare themselves to others in the same field and wonder why they are not as successful. Why do others get more press, make more money, have a better husband, or get the promotions? Why are others more popular or making more of a difference in the world? Even after they accomplish a certain level of success, they are still looking around at those more successful than they are and still not feeling good enough.

It is a mistake to let material goods and level of success determine how valuable you are. This view will make you work harder and harder, thinking that you are not good enough. Inevitably you will never feel good enough. You will always find someone who is better at what you do than you are. When you allow your self-worth to be contingent on your success in life, then your failures have a much bigger impact on your self-confidence. Then you have one more reason to ruminate. A failure inevitably reflects on your self-worth and brings you down.

When I had my first child and was home breast feeding after being a successful business woman, I was lost. Suddenly all of my accomplishments every day revolved around taking care of my baby. I was changing dirty diapers, doing laundry, breast feeding, setting up the Gymboree, and playing baby music. This was a far cry from the million-dollar deals I had been involved in previously. My self-esteem plummeted. Who was I now? I felt like a nobody. My ruminations were relentless as I felt sorry for myself in my new situation. Now, looking back, I am saddened to see I spent so much time feeling worthless rather than celebrating my good fortune and savoring every beautiful moment with my child. But my self-worth was so closely tied to my work accomplishments that I was nothing without them. I could not see that I was the same intelligent, accomplished woman I was before, just spending some time in a new role.

Know that everything you are does not change just because you are accomplishing something different. Just because you lost your job, doesn't mean that you are now less intelligent. Just because you didn't get that promotion doesn't mean you are less qualified. Just because that publisher turned you down, doesn't mean you are less talented. You are worthy no matter what you are accomplishing.

Remember, you are the not the sum of your accomplishments. You are an amazing creature of God or the universe (or whatever higher power you believe in) and worthy of happiness, love, and good things, no matter what happens to you in your life.

You are worthy.

You are good enough. Accept it, celebrate it, and for God's sake, stop ruminating about it.

Decide that now.

One thing that may help you separate your feelings of self-worth from your accomplishments is to clearly define what success means to you. Rather than measure your self-worth on some standard set by society, decide what constitutes your best life and be proud of it. Here's how I define success: I have loving relationships in my life, good friends, good health, work that I love and financial security.

All of these things make me truly happy and that's all I need to feel successful. Now this does not mean I don't have big dreams, I am just not defined by my accomplishments. For example, I want to grow my business to a certain size and I am working hard at making that happen. I focus on building the business, I do not waste time beating myself up because I'm not there yet. That will only zap the energy I need to keep persevering. There is some peace in knowing that I will get there when I get there.

It is natural for us to look at others to measure where we should be in our lives. We are, after all, social animals. We see peers being more successful at work. We see friends who are thinner and fitter, or live in nicer houses, or drive more expensive cars, or achieve great things in their work. Be confident about your own measure of success and no one else's.

Know what it is that will feed your soul
and focus on that without comparison.
With no judgment.
With love and compassion for yourself.

7. GIVE UP ON PERFECTIONISM

Many years ago Justin Wolfers and Betsey Stevenson at the Wharton School published a paper called The Paradox of Declining Female Happiness. Despite the fact that women have many more opportunities and career options today, they found that women are less happy than they were decades ago. They did not delve deeply into why this was the case. But reading the paper again recently gave me a clue about what could be detracting from female happiness. Wolfers and Stevenson used the Monitoring the Future dataset, which surveys 15,000 American high school students every year. They found that teenage girls tend to attach greater importance to more domains in life than do boys. The domains were things outside of the domestic realm like "being successful in my line of work," "being able to find steady work," "making a contribution to society,"and "being a leader in my community." I was stunned that these young women attached importance to 13 out of the 14 domains listed.

I thought about my mother. She really had one domain in life that she focused on: taking care of her family. In this realm she cooked, cleaned, helped us with homework, took care of us amazingly well, and also took care of my father. She was a big part of her church community where she did some volunteer work, but nothing interfered with her family duties. She was a good and loving mother. Imagine yourself like my mother, caring deeply about home and family. Now imagine adding another 12 domains to your attention span and placing high importance on each domain. Nowadays women want to be excellent at everything. I interviewed Alice Domar PhD, Executive Director of the Domar Center for Mind/Body Health. Dr. Domar is a leading expert on women and stress. She agreed that women stress about being perfect in all aspects of their lives. She adds with emphasis, "Whatever the list is, add 'thin' to that too."

Now it is one thing to stress about being perfect if you have only one domain in life that matters. It is quite another thing to expect to be perfect in 13 domains of life! What an impossible burden we have put on ourselves as women. No wonder we never feel good enough. This burden brings with it anxiety, depression, and chronic stress. There aren't enough hours in the day to be perfect in all of

these domains in life.

Personally, I am happy that so many domains are available to me as a woman. I don't think I would have been happy being home every day even though it is a perfectly admirable way to live. It is not the number of domains. It is perfectionism that is the real enemy. Given the breadth of opportunity today, I find that the only way to truly be happy is to decide that there are domains where you can be comfortable having lower standards of acceptable performance.

Many years ago when I was completing my solution-focused coaching certificate at the University of Toronto, my instructor, recalled a coaching session with a client. She asked the client where he felt he was right now in terms of a particular goal on a scale from 0 to 10. His response: "A 6." Then she asked him where he would ideally like to be. His response: "A 6." He was content being at a 6!

Now this struck me. Shouldn't we always be striving towards 10, I thought? Isn't that the only way to become excellent? Alice Domar, in the same interview, said something that changed my life. She said "It's okay to want to be perfect. It's not okay to expect to be perfect." I loved the thought that striving for perfection is really just striving for excellence. It just wasn't okay to beat yourself up if you didn't attain perfection in that endeavor. That's when I came up with the technique I call Peace at 6.

PEACE AT 6

I took a look at all the domains in my life to decide which ones I would strive for a 10 and which ones I would be happy reaching a 6. Housework immediately came to mind. While I like to have a clean house, I find that my house is constantly a mess. I guess having a perfect house just isn't a top priority for me and never has been. Now don't get me wrong. If someone came in and waved a magic wand and made my house look perfectly designed and pretty, I would not object. It's just that for me, keeping house is not my favorite activity.

So I immediately decided that no matter what was going on, I would be at peace if the state of my house was at a 6. That meant I had to give up my Lucy Ricardo style of cleaning house. If you remember the sitcom I love Lucy, Lucy Ricardo would run around her apartment cleaning everything just before people came over. She would stuff everything in the closet, and the place would look spotless. Now inevitably one of her guests would open the closet, and everything would come crashing out on top of her guest!

Funny as it was, this was my life. Whenever my kids saw me cleaning up, they would ask, "Mom, are people coming over?" To truly embrace being peaceful at 6, I had to surrender to the fact that people would come over and see my messy house. Now I do have a cleaning lady who comes every week to clean the house, so I do feel it is clean, but it's still always messy.

At first it was difficult. I felt uncomfortable letting people see my mess. But soon I became more and more comfortable. I kept reminding myself that this was something I was doing to relieve my own stress. Letting the house be messy allowed me to flourish and have more positive mental energy for areas of my life where I wanted to be at a 10. I stopped ruminating about the mess and learned to accept it. It was liberating.

I also decided that while I wanted to be healthy, I didn't need to be perfectly thin or perfectly gorgeous all the time. I allowed myself to eat that chocolate cake and go out without makeup. Again, it was liberating. I decided I did want to be a 10 in my relationships and in my work. But even in those domains, I do not beat myself up for not being perfect. Letting go of perfectionism has been

the most liberating thing I have done. While I still want to be perfect, I no longer expect it and I'm okay when I'm not. I call myself a recovering perfectionist.

Once you decide you will be peaceful at 6, embrace the areas where you want to be a 10 and forget the rest. If you have made the choice to be a stay-at-home mom while your kids are young, love it with all your energy. Decide that for a while you will be at a 6 in your career life or in serving your community. Maybe you will need to set your number even lower than a 6. Regretting the path you did not take will only zap your positive mental energy and prevent you from savoring how beautiful it is to be a stay-at-home mom.

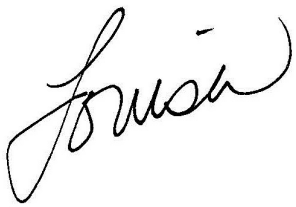
I go into more detail on how you can do this exercise in my book: *Wire Your Brain for Confidence; The Science of Conquering Self-Doubt*, available on Amazon.

Decide to love yourself, imperfections and all. Remember, a beautiful thing is never perfect.

A Final Note...

I hope these techniques help you to rid yourself of your ruminations once and for all. Keep in mind it took years for you to develop a rumination style. It will take time for you to think differently. As you practice and master each one of these techniques, your life will be transformed. Be committed to training your brain for a life without rumination. You will be so happy you did. Let me know how it goes. Please email me at louisa@louisajewell.com with any questions you have. I want to hear about your successes. To get my first chapter of my book for free visit: http://louisajewell.com/wireyourbrainforconfidence/

You have so much to contribute to the world. If you let go of the ruminations, you will see your light shine even brighter than it is today. I will be here, cheering you on as you go.



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