

Rumination

How to Stop Overthinking and How to Support Employees Who Ruminate

Excessive overthinking, also known as rumination, is a common experience among employees—particularly during periods of high workload, stress, or uncertainty. Rumination occurs when a person repeatedly replays the same thoughts, situations, or concerns without moving toward a solution. This pattern of thinking often feels automatic and difficult to stop. Employees may find themselves revisiting past conversations, worrying about mistakes, or anticipating negative outcomes. Over time, rumination can affect focus, mood, and productivity, making it difficult to remain engaged and present during the workday. Understanding what rumination is and recognizing the early signs can help both employees and supervisors interrupt the cycle before it escalates.

Rumination often develops when someone is attempting to make sense of a stressful situation. The individual may believe that continued thinking will lead to clarity or resolution. In reality, rumination rarely results in effective problem-solving. Instead, it keeps the mind stuck in a loop, increasing stress and emotional fatigue. An employee who is ruminating may appear distracted, struggle to shift between tasks, or remain preoccupied with issues that have already been addressed. Common indicators include replaying the same event or conversation, difficulty letting go of mistakes, persistent “what if” thinking, trouble concentrating on current responsibilities, or feeling mentally “stuck.” These warning signs are important to notice, as they often indicate when support or intervention may be beneficial.

Stopping rumination requires intentional strategies that disrupt repetitive thought patterns. One effective approach is refocusing attention. Shifting to a task that requires active engagement—such as organizing a workspace, reviewing a checklist, or taking a short walk—can interrupt the cycle and allow the mind to reset. Structured thinking is another helpful tool. Employees can ask themselves whether the situation they are worried about is something they can act on. If the answer is yes, identifying a specific, manageable next step can restore a sense of control. If the answer is no, redirecting attention to tasks within their control helps prevent continued dwelling. Setting boundaries around thinking time can also be effective. Rather than allowing rumination to dominate the day, employees can designate a short, specific period to reflect on a concern. Once that time has passed, shifting to another activity helps contain the overthinking. Grounding techniques are equally useful for bringing attention back to the present moment. These strategies may include focusing on what can be seen, heard, or felt in the immediate environment, or practicing slow, intentional breathing. Grounding reduces the intensity of racing thoughts and helps stabilize focus.

Challenging negative assumptions is another important component. Individuals who ruminate often engage in self-criticism or worst-case scenario thinking. Replacing thoughts such as “I should have done better” with more balanced, realistic perspectives can reduce emotional strain and support clearer thinking. Maintaining healthy routines also plays a key role. Regular breaks, hydration, movement, and consistent sleep help promote mental clarity and reduce the tendency to overthink. Employees should also be encouraged to seek support when needed. The Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is a valuable resource, offering confidential* guidance, coping strategies, and stress management tools for employees struggling with rumination or related concerns.

Supervisors play a critical role in supporting employees who may be experiencing rumination. The first step is listening without immediately trying to “fix” the issue. Allowing an employee to briefly express a concern helps them feel heard; however, supervisors should avoid encouraging repeated retelling, which can unintentionally reinforce rumination. Instead, supervisors can gently redirect the conversation toward action by asking questions such as, “What is within your control right now?” or “What is the next step you can take?” These questions promote forward movement rather than continued dwelling.

Supervisors can also suggest practical grounding strategies, such as taking a short break, stepping outside for a brief walk, or focusing on a task that naturally shifts attention. Modeling balanced thinking is equally important. Calm, factual reassurance helps employees gain perspective without feeding into worst-case interpretations. For example, instead of focusing solely on what went wrong, a supervisor might emphasize what has already been resolved or what steps are currently underway. When appropriate, supervisors should also remind employees of available resources, including the EAP, particularly if rumination is affecting performance or well-being.

Maintaining a supportive and steady tone is essential. Employees who struggle with rumination may be more sensitive to perceived criticism or pressure. Supervisors should strive to create an environment that is understanding while still reinforcing expectations and accountability. Clear communication, patience, and consistency help build trust and reduce the anxiety that often fuels rumination.

Rumination is a common response to stress, but it becomes counterproductive when it interferes with focus, decision-making, and job performance. By recognizing the signs early, applying practical strategies, and fostering a supportive workplace culture, both employees and supervisors can reduce its impact. When employees feel equipped to manage their thoughts and supported by their supervisors, the entire organization benefits from a healthier, more productive, and more resilient workforce.

For additional guidance and confidential assistance, leaders are encouraged to reach out to the Employee Assistance Program, which provides professional resources to support well-being and effective leadership.

**EAP counselors have master's degrees and are licensed professionals. Your privacy is protected by strict federal and state confidentiality laws and regulations and by professional ethical standards for counselors. Information you share with the EAP may not be released to anyone without your prior written consent, except as required by law (e.g. when a person's emotional condition is a threat to him or herself or others, or there is suspected child or elder abuse) or the issuance of a court order upon a showing of good cause.*