

Dr Olena Edwards

How to beat rumination/eternity thinking and catastrophising using neuroplasticity and my 4R method

We live in the times of acute rise of anxiety and depression which have devastating effects on our communities . As a response to that, we are also experiencing a renaissance in mental health and the change in attitudes towards it where indeed there is more and more acceptance that “ Mental health is health “ ,with less stigma attached and more understanding and learning around this issue.

We start with what it’s like to be you and what are the areas that you feel you need to work on. For a lot of my clients, those areas are negative eternity thinking and falling into the rabbit hole of rumination and catastrophising.

Neuroscience teaches us that if we pick something simple and experience it for a breath or two with the regular practice trying to sustain it, we **turn states into traits.**(Dr Rick Hansen)

Changing attitudes, thinking patterns and behaviours is about practicing your chosen technique regularly; as we are building up traits from routine exercises.

When we fill ourselves up with these little things/ experiences , I call them “pockets of pleasure” ,multiple times a day, we feel full of calm happiness and balance.

The basic rule of neuroscience: neurons that fire together -wire together.

Think about what you want to practice and grow inside yourself. Hold on to the sense of your own personal grit – you will feel more determined to replicate your success and apply it in other areas of you your life experience as it serves as a reassurance that you can be determined, committed and victorious .

It is really important to be mindful and try to experience a feeling of warm and positive connection multiple times during the day, which in itself is a huge antidote to anxiety. As Rick Hansen teaches us “slow down for a breath or longer, close your eyes and try to bring in a feeling of warmth and connectivity“ , I would add then “ exhale with a gentle smile “ – it takes roughly 6 seconds. I call it a 6 six second sanity pause in the chaos and madness of your day.

Dr John Gottman, a leading expert in marriage and couples therapy , postulates that a 6 second kiss is a magic glue to emotional intimacy and closeness if practiced daily. He based this statement on numerous interviews with thousands of couples and empirical research into happy couples who are emotionally connected and fulfilled in their relationship.

Practicing self-compassion is the key to reducing anxiety as quite often it is a result of some form of harsh treatment like judgement, resentment or neglect compounded and amalgamated over the years. Compassion is a combination of empathy and suffering with

benevolence, a movement to help if we can. It is incredibly soothing for us as a helper and the one we are choosing to help.

The concept of neuroplasticity teaches us that we can change the state of our anxious mind, we can rewire it with building the scaffolding of healthy habits and wellbeing practices around our battered self.

Paracel postulated that what you practice grows stronger. Our mind takes its shape of what it rests upon. If we ruminate on , we reinforce the bad thoughts as the brain has a negativity bias. Equally , if we create the space for positive experiences and start practicing them mindfully and purposefully, we inevitably reinforce them.

When I work with anxiety as a main diagnosis or a part of more complex diagnosis (CPTSD or ADHD) , I try to establish a simple routine with a client which is fairly easy and doable (parasympathetic breathing a part of it) , where to me , as a practitioner ,the process and engagement is more important than the outcome. Sometimes, it is quite difficult to help a client to flip the paradigm where our views on process vs outcome would realign. If they are able to stick to it, it gives them a sense of achievement and grounding , a sense of safety and predictability that reinforces the attitude of “ I can manage it “ , “ This is something I am in control of” , which is a great start.

Repetition, dwelling in ordinary human experiences is absolutely paramount to the holistic process of successful anxiety and rumination treatment. I ask my clients to think: How do you dwell and what dwells within you .

As Dr Hansen notes there is no replacement for **action** which I fully ascribe to. We cannot therapise everything. Ordinary human experiences and mundane chores of starting your day with making your bed, brushing your teeth, stroking your cat, making a cup of tea, going to the greengrocers, walking your dog etc are hugely important routines that act as bolts and beams of your well-being scaffolding . They act as grounding experiences that take you away from hostage situations when you are being overtaken by the paralysis of anxiety. They pull you away from amygdala cortical reactivation – which is rumination- and increase the activity in the right hemi-sphere.

These simple routines and rituals practiced daily, play an important role in helping you to shift the tyrannical internal voice of the toxic inner critic. If it persists, it is important to acknowledge it as opposed to keep ignoring it: **name it to tame, don't blame it** -is the first step of working through your negative thought process, which in CBT is referred to as NATS (negative automatic thinking) .

By naming and identifying your emotion (anger, sorrow, shame) we reduce activity in amygdala and enhance self-regulation. As I like to say, we restore the bridge between our rational and emotional mind .

With persistent rumination (NATs and catastrophic thinking) I suggest here to try and practice my 4R method . You need to separate your thoughts , single out the core one and try to go through the following four step process:

1. **Rise and Recognise** : Dr Hansen works with the concept of allocentric visual processing which suggests that if we raise our gaze to the horizon or above , we get a better sense of the whole as opposed to being sucked into the rumination vortex. So raise your gaze and say to yourself : “I recognise this thought is a NAT” (name it to tame it)
2. **Rationalise**: I offer two ways of rationalising depending on the nature of your NAT
 1. Ask yourself where is the evidence? Quite often, we simply can't find it and it brings us to realisation that this NAT is a construct of our anxious mind which makes it easier to let go. You can be creative and humorous here and ask any questions you like/find relevant to prove that this thought is just an anxious construct but not a true reflection of reality. **Thoughts are not facts.**

Example: “ All my friends at school think that I am ugly and dumb” .

I recognise this thought is a NAT. Where is the evidence ? They looked weirdly at me when I came to the party wearing that jacket , but it does not prove they actually think I am ugly and dumb, etc because quite a few of them spoke to me after and offered me a drink. The guy who lives close by offered me a lift home at the end of the party.

2. Asking yourself: What is the worst-case scenario?

Quite often when we rationalise this way, we will see that the situation is not as catastrophic as our anxious emotional mind presents it .

They think I am dumb and they will dump me . Ok then, what indeed is the worst case scenario? None of these friends will any longer speak to me or may contact me , they will avoid me at the school, they may post things about me on social media just because I got this look at the party when I arrived?

Firstly, it was only a few who gave me that look and they are not even my close friends. So if they think so I have no control of that but, equally, there are others who were engaging and nice to me at the party , etc

3. Recycle

After we have rationalised and brought the negativity closer to zero , reduced its magnitude or eliminated it completely, we need to try and get rid of this thought .

Here we use a simple visualisation : imagine this thought written as a text on a piece of paper. Imagine further jamming the paper and throwing it into the bin or burning it .

The easy way to remember : “ **bin it or burn it**” . Using visualisation engages your creative ability and helps to reset the rumination loop .

4. Reassure

After we have recycled the thought in our mind, we try to finish on a positive note , bringing a sense of calm and gratitude, reminding ourselves of real life situations , our individual life experiences that empirically prove the opposite of negativity thinking constructs .

For example, I reassure myself as I know that a lot of other friends are supportive of me and will not judge me by how I look . Last week , I had a great time hanging out with kids from my drama group and had a great fun.

I may be struggling with that particular group of individuals now , but I am going to concentrate on what gives me joy and makes me feel appreciated and loved.

Now use real facts that help you to feel in that way.

For example :last week I got my merit in Lamda exam, my father took me to the tank museum and we drove all the way to Bovington having a great time together, my little neighbour thanked me for helping him to repair his bike , etc.

Take a breath or two , stay with this memory and this feeling of calm , happiness and gratitude. See how you feel in your body and in your mind. Concentrate on your breathing , breathe slowly . Do a couple of rounds of Samurai breathing.

Difficult thoughts and unpleasant emotions come to all of us, like waves in the ocean ,emerging, rising and subsiding : we cannot stop the waves but we can learn how to ride them .

The 3Cs are easy and serve both as a point of reference and a mental reminder that to achieve change we need to be **conscious consistent and compliant** .