It has consistently been shown that depressive rumination is related to episodes of depression, and depressive symptoms. For example, self-reports of rumination are good predictors of the beginning of a depressive episode, and sometimes how long it lasts (Nolen-Hoeksema & Morrow, 1991). Even after the depressive episode has gone, continuing rumination is a useful predictor of it occurring again at least three months later (Kosinski & Weber, 1999). Links have also been made between depressive rumination and other problems, such as worry, neuroticism and anxiety, to name but a few. However, these relationships are more consistent, and more robust, with depressive symptoms than with any other psychological processes.

It is not clear exactly why we ruminate, although there are strong reasons for thinking that it may simply be an unsuitable strategy adopted to try and cope with these emotions (Smith & Alley, 2009). Whatever the purpose, people with depression who also ruminate, have difficulties with some aspects of emotional expression. For these reasons, rumination is often referred to as depressive rumination. Indeed, it is this link between depression and rumination that has captured the most attention over the past 20 years.

While research has focused upon rumination and depression, and though mindfulness training, of being aware how a particular mood may be changing the way in which one thinks about something, especially if this mindfulness training has been most effective when the individual has a history of several episodes of depression (Ma & Teasdale, 2004). But how about people not in this situation?

Short-term distraction may also be a way to reduce rumination and get things back on track. When it comes to distraction it is about quality rather than quantity: it may be more effective when people do things that they consider to be enjoyable, they feel completely absorbed in, and that they find uplifting (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008). Indeed, if people do activities that aren’t enjoyable, they aren’t absorbed in, and that don’t find uplifting, it will be no surprise if their mind wanders back to the negative mood they wanted to avoid thinking about. Crucially, after distraction it is important that the person tries to solve any problems that need to be addressed, preferably in ways which focus on long-term practical solutions (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008).

It is commonly said that distraction might be helpful. It is associated with depression, worry, anxiety, neuroticism and other personal issues. It may also lead to biases in memory and problem solving. However, it isn’t all bad news – there are ways of avoiding these negative consequences: one is to connect the links between a person’s mood and their thoughts may help them respond in an intentional and controlled way.

The problem with rumination

Matthew Coxon with the third in our series for budding writers (see www.bps.org.uk/newvoices for more information)