

## WHEN ANGER LINGERS: REPETITIVE THOUGHTS

Write down what you keep on continuously thinking about?

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Is this something that has already happened but continues to have consequences on my life? Is it something that keeps on happening?

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**PAST CANNOT BE UNDONE.** Unfortunately, our behaviour can make the impact of our painful past stronger than it has to be. Examples include: (1) an abuse victim who is unable to engage in life unless the abuser is punished and consequently puts his or her life on hold, (2) a person who thinks things over and over again in order to get them out of their system but in fact gets more worked up about the issues, (3) a person who is so afraid of having angry thoughts that she or he tries to push these away and constantly distracts herself or himself at a cost of not doing what is important or (4) a person who engages in a series of unsuccessful confrontations with an individual whom they believe to be hurtful and makes their own wellbeing dependent on acceptance from this hurtful individual. Does any of these examples remind you of your own behaviours?

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What would you like to see happen as a result of your actions? (What is the function of your behaviour?)

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Do the results of your actions match your goals?

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Are there any positive outcomes associated with what you are doing? For instance, a person who feels angry and hurt usually also feels justified in their position. Letting go would imply being wrong or giving up. Many people would prefer to maintain their old patterns over facing such possibility. Think about what makes it difficult for you to change your patterns and what are the good things that happen as a result of your behaviour?

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Is what you get the same as what you want?

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Anger is might be justified, however it is not necessarily useful. Anger is viewed as a “moral emotion” that is connected with our sense of justice. Ask yourself what is it that you want to see happen to the person or persons that you hold responsible for bad things in your life?

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What are your own life goals? How would you like your life to be? What would you be doing in life if it were the way you want it?

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Is what you want to see happen in your life fully dependent on what you wish would happen to people who have hurt you? Are there some things that you can start doing to get closer to your goals that do not involve these individuals?

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Sometimes people would engage in revenge fantasies or imagine themselves being vindicated as people around them become sympathetic to their plight. Now, let’s say that you want the typical stuff: job and a relationship. Imagine that you have spent most of your life on ensuring that the guilty party gets their just deserts and you have succeeded. Everyone knows that you have been wronged. But you have been so preoccupied with your hurt that you neglected life, you have no relationships or just very superficial ones and you made little effort to get ahead professionally.

By the way, if you have not done any of these things because you tended to tell yourself “if only”, you’re pretty much like most people in the world. It is hard to break emotionally reinforced cycles. Pause and think about what things you can do to get what you want that are not dependent on any amends from individuals who have hurt you. What are those things?

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Is there anything that blocks you from doing what you have identified in response to the last question? Usually there are plenty of roadblocks. We need to find ways of dealing with these obstacles. Sometimes it may be a very strong belief that all efforts are futile. Sometimes it is overwhelming anxiety. Other times, we lack clarity where to start or even what is important to us. It is worthwhile to spend some time on this, list your blocks and be honest about what they are as otherwise we won't be able to tackle them.

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Sometimes we get angry over the events that are really nobody's fault. It is normal to assume cause-and-effect relationships between events. For instance, if I speak with a friend who works at the place where I would like to work shortly before my interview and I succeed in getting that job, I am very likely to think that this friend had put a good word for me. On the other hand, if I don't get the job, I may get somewhat uncomfortable seeing that person again and later become angry with them for not putting a good word for me. If I get lost in my angry thoughts, I may even end up by holding that person responsible for what has happened. This may be somewhat exaggerated, but such patterns of thinking are quite common in life simply because in many situations our deductions are true. If there is a bunch of people playing ball and I get hit over the head, I may hold the ball thrower responsible for my injury and assume that if they did not throw the ball, I would not have been injured. The problems happen when our usual ways of thinking are not applicable (e.g., a friend has no influence on the hiring process and the ball thrower hurt me unintentionally). There are also many events that happen for no reason at all. Car accidents can happen due to mechanical malfunction that could not be detected, a well-meaning boss may have to fire his staff because the company went down, someone develops a serious illness. Can you think of some events in your own life that you are angry about but that may have happened by chance and not as a result of purposeful action of others?

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When facing highly distressing negative life events, we typically ask questions and express our frustration. The typical questions are: (1) "why me?" and (2) "Why did it happen?" The typical associated thoughts are: (1) "If only x did not happen, I would be doing y" and (2) "This should not have happened". It is possible that your thoughts and questions may be little different, but by now you are probably painfully aware of what usually happens when you get lost in your thoughts. Write down these thoughts.

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Now spend some time examining the costs and benefits of focussing on your questions and thoughts. Keep in mind that you are not being asked to see if your thoughts are justified but to **EXAMINE WHETHER FOCUSING ON THESE THOUGHTS IS BENEFICIAL TO YOU EVEN IF THEY ARE JUSTIFIED.**

Benefits of focusing on the thought or question that you are focusing on:

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Costs of focusing on the thought or question that you are focusing on:

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Benefits of not focusing on the thought or question that you are focusing on:

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Costs of not focusing on the thought or question that you are focusing on. (You will probably find a lot about yourself by completing this part – that is how we identify our blocks and rules that we devised for our life in order to protect ourselves.):

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In the end, remember two things.

One, thinking is NOT doing. We want to be thoughtful but dwelling on the past prevents us from building the future that we desire. Our life circumstances can only be changed by our actions. Finally, many of us desire closure.

Two, many of us desire closure. Closure means that we are able to move on and is the very opposite of perseverative thinking.