

Thought Stopping

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Repetitive thinking is the biggest waste of cognitive bandwidth this side of heroin addiction, and we all do it. The most obvious cases are labeled with a diagnosis of *Obsessive Compulsive Disorder*, for which there are a variety of effective treatments. An official diagnosis of OCD may include the specification *With Poor Insight*, which means the person does not recognize that their obsessive thoughts are excessive or unreasonable. Moving down the spectrum of severity we sometimes say that we are *preoccupied* or *hung up* on something.

If we are enjoying our repetitive thoughts we might say that we are *engrossed*, *spellbound*, *rapt*, or *absorbed* in them. I very much enjoy thinking some of my favorite thoughts and fantasies over and over again. Whether or not repetitive thinking is a problem depends on whether or not it's a problem. When you can't get out of your house because you keep going back to check all the light switches over and over, it's a problem. If you are tortured by resentment about past offences or by worry about things you can't effect, it's a problem. On the other hand, repetitive thinking is often the only route to a breakthrough or insight into a complicated or subtle problem or opportunity. Effective detectives, scientists, philosophers, and artists reflect on their respective themes until the pattern they are searching for emerges as a blinding revelation. The trick is to recognize when repetitive thinking is productive and when it's getting in the way of something. When it's a problem and you don't see it then you are eligible for the *With Poor Insight* diagnosis.

Regardless of whether your repetitive thoughts are problematic, pleasant, or productive, they are consuming your cognitive bandwidth, which you could be using for other things. When it's not a problem, this is a matter of taste and style, but a systematic examination of your own repetitive thinking might yield some surprising results and give you some choices that you didn't know you had. Call me.



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