

Ending the Rumination Game for Our Clients

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We've all experienced the client who can't let go of an event. It's the CEO who wishes she hadn't screwed up the pitch. Or, the team leader who can't believe he got passed over for the promotion. It's the client who deeply regrets offending her sister during Thanksgiving dinner. She spoke too soon, he didn't think through the consequences, she should have studied harder, he didn't mean to hurt his mom's feelings. Whatever the precipitating event, the client is left with *if only*.

If only I'd kept my mouth shut?

If only I'd included that other slide.

If only I could hit rewind.

Each week, you watch the same movie; the plot never thickens, the conversations run on repeat, and your client can't seem to move forward. At best, you lose interest; at worst, you and the client lose faith in one another (or yourselves).

Rumination, the endless loop of self-scrutiny, can keep clients stuck and unable to gain deeper insight into what really went wrong (or right!). Breaking our client's rumination cycles can seem near impossible.

As someone who tends to find herself ruminating more often than I'd like to admit, I knew that for myself and my clients, I needed a plan. These five strategies can help your clients pause the rumination, make a conscious choice to learn from the event, and put learning into action.

Navigate with Curiosity

When coaches sense rumination we tend to shut down and return to level 1 listening. We think, *Here we go again, or Will she ever let this go?* The client may be telling the same story, but we are asking the same questions and maintaining a familiar range.

Instead of falling into our client's patterns, we need to ground ourselves in our expertise: deep listening. We must shift from judgment to openness and curiosity: *What is really going on for my client? What's the underlying feeling?* As we do this—as we intrude and share our intuition—we move from venting toward acknowledgment of experiences. We hear what the emotions are trying to convey and can peel back the truth. We listen as only a coach can.

Offer a Reality Check

As you listen deeply, you'll be able to help your client sort through which messages and emotions are real and which are based in fear. You'll ask questions like, "What's true about this?" and "What's not true?"

As the coach, you know and see things your client cannot. You can offer compassion by sharing what you see in them and acknowledging all that they *do* bring to the table. You can request that the client do the same, by being kind and compassionate to themselves, pointing out that they would never treat a friend as poorly as they treat themselves.

You can ask, "Who cares about this as much as you?" Usually, everyone else has moved on and forgotten the event. When the client acknowledges that it's an inner war, they can choose to let go.

Make It Stop

Coaches have a unique ability (and responsibility) to bring immediacy to the client.

"It seems like we are talking in circles and not making much progress. I find it a little boring and frustrating; I'm curious what it's like for you?"

By sharing your experience and the impact the client is having on you, you can bring an awareness to the client that very few people are courageous enough to offer. As the client recognizes their patterns, you can suggest an activity to make it stop. Tell the client you will give them three minutes to get everything out that needs to be said about the event. Then you'll yell, "STOP!" and that will signal the time to move forward, leaving the ruminations behind. This is something they can do on their own using a timer and picturing a red stop sign.

Adopt a Learning Stance

The powerful question, "What's useful here for you?" comes in handy when facing a serial ruminator. Remind the client that there's always something they can learn to move forward. Challenge the client to find the learnings and write them down. Just as a fascinated anthropologist would, dig deeper and help uncover even greater insights. How will they grow from this experience?

Move to Action

Once you've explored the event with curiosity, offered a reality check, helped pause the rumination cycle, and collected the learnings, you are ready to do what coaches do best: move to action.

What does your client need to do now? Do they need to apologize to the boss? Ask for a do-over with the client? Or, have they realized that there's something more they need to go after?

As your client releases the inner commentary of *if only*, leave them with the question, “What’s important now?”

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