

How Do I Stop Ruminating?

Read the article first. This worksheet accompanies *Meditation Is the Practice of Returning* at ThoughtsFromATherapist.com, which explains why a wandering mind is not a failed meditation, how every return works like a repetition, and what it means to differentiate from the radio. Search “practice of returning” on the site to find it.

Anxiety plays like a radio in the background, broadcasting thoughts, predictions, memories, and worries. The goal is not to smash the radio, or even to turn it off. It is to recognize that we do not have to obey every broadcast. This worksheet logs what the radio says, practices the return, and counts returns rather than quiet minutes. Use it during a sitting practice or on a day when one loop keeps coming back. A few words per space is enough.

THE RADIO Notice the broadcast

Attention wanders to the grocery list, then work, then a conversation we wish had gone differently. That is not failure. The moment we notice where attention went, the exercise has begun.

THE RETURN Three lines

Name the thought and where it lands in the body. Validate the pull, since there is often a real reward for staying with it. Then give the mind an assignment: tell it what to attend to, not what to avoid. “Don’t think of a penguin” produces a penguin.

That is a ___ thought, and I notice my ___ tightens.

I really want to keep my attention here... and I have agreed to stay in the present.

Let me attend to ___ so closely I could describe it to someone with their eyes closed.

MORAL JUDGMENT If they are..., then I am...

Thoughts with the power to ruminate often carry a moral judgment about someone else. Judging them confirms who we tell ourselves we are, and that reward keeps the loop running.

THE COUNT Every return is a repetition

Like a bicep curl, the repetition is how strength develops. Over time we notice sooner, return sooner, and recover sooner.

A WORKED EXAMPLE: A RUN THROUGH AN OPEN FIELD

THE MOMENT	Three hours alone, a seven-mile run through an open field in late November, sixty degrees, juniper against yellow grass.
THE BROADCAST	Three work situations: “an unethical liar,” “a selfish oblivious person,” “inadequacy and hypocrisy.”
IN THE BODY	My chest tightens to this subject.
THE PULL	There is a pleasant feeling in labeling moral deficiency while problem solving.
IF THEY ARE...	If they are unethical, selfish, and inconsistent, then I am ethical, selfless, adequate, and consistent.
ASSIGNMENT	Look at the scenery so closely I could write a poem that paints it for someone with their eyes closed.
RETURNS	About twenty-five returns in twenty-five minutes. Then the rest of the run, and two sittings, in the present.

The breath is the most direct line we have to the nervous system. Breathing in for about four counts and out for about six, weighted toward the exhale, communicates safety to the body while the thoughts are still anxious.

The radio log

Log one broadcast per box. The same broadcast can return many times; log it once and count the returns on the next page.

BROADCAST ONE

What the radio
said

Log the broadcast, then check which kind of anxiety it belongs to.

THE BROADCAST, WORD FOR WORD

WHERE IT LANDED IN MY BODY (TEXTURE, TEMPERATURE, MOVEMENT)

HOW LONG I FOLLOWED IT BEFORE I NOTICED, AND WHAT BROUGHT ME BACK

- | | |
|--|--|
| ☐ The snake is in the room (present danger) | ☐ The snake was in the room (it resembles the past) |
| ☐ There might be a snake (a hypothesis) | ☐ My life is out of alignment |

BROADCAST TWO

What the radio
said

Log the broadcast, then check which kind of anxiety it belongs to.

THE BROADCAST, WORD FOR WORD

WHERE IT LANDED IN MY BODY (TEXTURE, TEMPERATURE, MOVEMENT)

HOW LONG I FOLLOWED IT BEFORE I NOTICED, AND WHAT BROUGHT ME BACK

- | | |
|--|--|
| ☐ The snake is in the room (present danger) | ☐ The snake was in the room (it resembles the past) |
| ☐ There might be a snake (a hypothesis) | ☐ My life is out of alignment |

BROADCAST THREE

What the radio
said

Log the broadcast, then check which kind of anxiety it belongs to.

THE BROADCAST, WORD FOR WORD

WHERE IT LANDED IN MY BODY (TEXTURE, TEMPERATURE, MOVEMENT)

HOW LONG I FOLLOWED IT BEFORE I NOTICED, AND WHAT BROUGHT ME BACK

- | | |
|--|--|
| ☐ The snake is in the room (present danger) | ☐ The snake was in the room (it resembles the past) |
| ☐ There might be a snake (a hypothesis) | ☐ My life is out of alignment |

The four checkboxes are the four kinds of anxiety. One broadcast can belong to more than one, and naming the kind tells us what it is asking for.

Practicing the return

Write the three lines once for the loudest broadcast, so they are ready the next time it plays.

MY THREE LINES

Name it and locate it. Validate the pull. Give the mind an assignment.

1. THAT IS A ___ THOUGHT, AND I NOTICE IT IN MY...

2. I REALLY WANT TO STAY WITH THIS THOUGHT BECAUSE... AND I HAVE AGREED TO STAY IN THE PRESENT.

3. LET ME ATTEND TO... (A SIGHT, A SOUND, THE BREATH, MY HEARTBEAT)

IF THEY ARE ___, THEN I AM ___

For loops that carry a moral judgment. What does judging them let me believe about myself?

IF THEY ARE...

THEN I AM...

WHAT I LOSE BY STAYING IN THIS LOOP (THE FIELD, THE GAME, THE PEOPLE I AM WITH):

THE TALLY

Count returns, not
quiet minutes

One mark for every return. A high count is a strong practice.

DAY, AND WHAT I PRACTICED ON

RETURNS (ONE MARK EACH)

Over the week

The anxious thought still appears. What changes is how long we follow it.

HOW AVAILABLE WAS EACH THIS WEEK?

Rate each from 0 (not at all) to 10 (most of the time). There is no target number.

Noticing sooner: catching the broadcast early

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Returning sooner: coming back without a long argument

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Recovering sooner: my body settling after a loop

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

NOTICING

Where did I catch the radio earlier than I used to? What tipped me off?

RETURNING

Which assignment worked best: a sense, the breath, a task? Which one did my mind argue with?

OUTSIDE THE PRACTICE

A moment in ordinary life when I heard the broadcast and chose whether to obey it.

NEXT WEEK

When and where I will practice, and for how long. Small and regular works better than long and rare.

Practiced reactively, this helps a little. Practiced consistently, before we need it, the body begins to return on its own.