

# When it comes to mental health, a problem shared can be a problem doubled

November 28 2017, by Robin Bailey

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

People discuss their problems with friends in the hope that they'll gain some insight into how to solve them. And even if they don't find a way to solve their problems, it feels good to let off some steam. Indeed, having close friends to confide in is a good buffer against poor mental health. How problems are discussed, though, can be the difference

between halving a problem or doubling it.

The term psychologists use for negative problem sharing is "[co-rumination](#)". Co-rumination is the mutual encouragement to discuss problems excessively, repeatedly going over the same problems, anticipating future problems and focusing on [negative feelings](#). It is more about dwelling on problems than solving them.

Research shows that co-rumination is a double-edged sword. In a [study](#) involving children aged seven to 15 years of age, researchers found that co-rumination in both boys and girls is associated with "high-quality" and close friendships. However, in girls, it was also associated with anxiety and depression (the same association was not found with the boys).

And studies suggest that co-rumination isn't just a problem for girls. Co-rumination with work colleagues can increase the risk of [stress and burn out](#), one study suggests. Maybe it's not always helpful to have a good moan with a colleague.

How you co-ruminate matters too. In a [group of adults](#), the effects of co-rumination was compared between face-to-face contact, telephone contact, texting and [social media](#). The positive effects of co-rumination (closer friendships) was found in face-to-face contact, telephone contact and texting, but not in social media. The negative aspects of co-rumination (anxiety) was found in face-to-face communication and telephone contact, but not texting or social media.

Verbal forms of communication seem to enhance both the positive and negative aspects of co-rumination more than non-verbal communication.

## **Why we co-ruminate**

If we look at the theory behind why individuals ruminate, it may shed some light on why friends co-ruminate. According to a [leading theory](#) on rumination, people believe that it will help them find answers and make them feel better. So if two people believe rumination is beneficial, then working together to co-ruminate to find answers may seem like a useful thing to do, as two heads may appear better than one. But focusing on problems and negative emotion together can increase negative beliefs and moods – and result in a greater need to co-ruminate.

Traditionally, therapy has not prioritised tackling rumination or co-rumination directly as maintaining factors in psychological distress. Instead, approaches such as [cognitive behavioural therapy](#) (CBT) have aimed to challenge only the content of rumination. Humanistic approaches (such as counselling) have provided conditions to potentially ruminate on the content of problems. And psychodynamic approaches (such as psychoanalysis) have aimed to analyse the content of rumination.

Focusing on the content of rumination, as all three approaches do, runs the risk of fostering co-rumination between client and therapist. If this occurs in therapy, a strong therapeutic relationship may well be a positive outcome of co-rumination – regardless of whether the client's symptoms improve or not.

More [modern treatments](#), such as meta-cognitive therapy, developed by Adrian Wells at the University of Manchester, specifically target beliefs about rumination. It is designed to help people understand the negative effects of rumination, its ineffectiveness as a coping strategy and as something people have control over. Results indicate the superior effectiveness of this approach in tackling anxiety and depression [compared with CBT](#).

And, on the social side, discussing [problems](#) with friends doesn't always

have to lead to worsening [mental health](#), as long as the discussion involves finding solutions and the person with the problem acts on those solutions. Then, relationships can be positive and beneficial to both parties, and a problem shared can really be a problem halved.

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