The differential diagnosis of repetitive thoughts

Persistent patterns of repetitive thinking which cause significant distress or functional impairment are core symptoms of virtually every diagnostic category within the Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5), including autism spectrum disorder and other neurodevelopmental disorders, as well as anxiety, mood and psychotic disorders. Subtypes of repetitive thoughts include preoccupations, ruminations, obsessions, over-valued ideas and delusions.

**Preoccupations**

Preoccupations are pleasurable repetitive thoughts. While they are generally enjoyable for the individual, they can become problematic when they become excessive or overly time-consuming. A highly intense, enjoyable interest in a specific topic which an individual spends a lot of time thinking about is an example of a preoccupation.

**Ruminations**

Ruminations are similar to preoccupations in that they are also repetitive thoughts that are congruent with mood state. The key characteristic which differentiates ruminations from preoccupations is that ruminations are non-pleasurable. They are typically negative and nihilistic in content. The individual may have limited insight with regards to the irrational nature of the thoughts. A repetitive, negative thought such as “I have not done anything worthwhile in my life” is an example of a rumination.

**Obsessions**

The DSM-5 defines obsessions as recurrent and persistent thoughts, urges or images which the individual attempts to ignore, suppress or neutralize with some other thought or action. Obsessions are experienced as intrusive and unwanted, causing high levels of anxiety or distress. Importantly, insight about the irrational nature of the thought is usually retained. However, obsessions can also be accompanied by poor insight, where the individual thinks the thoughts are probably true, or absent insight, where the individual is completely convinced that the thoughts are true. Recurrent, intrusive thoughts of fear of harming others because of not being careful enough is an example of an obsession.

**Over-valued ideas**

Over-valued ideas are isolated, abnormal beliefs which are associated with strong affect and are experienced as unwanted and distressing. In contrast to obsessions, over-valued ideas are associated with fluctuating insight. The individual is generally convinced about the veracity of the thought but can often be temporarily persuaded otherwise when presented with evidence to the contrary or significant reassurance. The thought, “My nose is larger than it should be, I think” is an example of an over-valued idea.

**Delusions**

Delusions are fixed, false beliefs which are held with strong conviction despite compelling counterarguments. Delusions can be either pleasurable or distressing, depending on the content of the delusion. The thought “I am sure the government is spying on me” is an example of a delusion.