

Mood Smoothie Chapter 4:



Understanding and Coping with Sticky Thinking



Jennifer Keluskar, Ph.D.



What is Sticky Thinking?



You can't get past an embarrassing comment you made at a party.

You wake up in the middle of the night, and can't fall back asleep because you are worrying about whether weekend plans will work out.

You read a tragic news story and can't stop imagining a similar event befalling your loved ones.

Sticky thinking is an informal term, but as a mental health professional, I have seen "aha" reactions when I use it to help people better understand their own or their child's emotional difficulties. As opposed to productive thinking, which leads to planning, organizing, and solving problems, sticky thinking is repetitive, distressing, and intrusive. It is also distracting, interferes with being able to fall asleep at night, and takes away from your enjoyment of the present moment.

This chapter describes what these thoughts look like and what you can do to tame them.



Sticky Thinking is Repetitive



Sticky thoughts start off as “pop-ups,” or thoughts that interfere with what you are doing at that moment. “Pop-ups” are like the annoying advertisements that get in the way when you are using an electronic application. They can come up during any daily task. For example, you are watching a television show that reminds you of an embarrassing situation you had in the past. “Pop-up” thoughts become “sticky” when you are unable to direct your attention away from them. Trying to cancel them works for only a few moments before they come up again. Many of my clients report experiencing them more when trying to fall asleep or during lull moments in their day, times when they are not occupied with tasks that might help them direct attention elsewhere.



Sticky Thinking is Distressing



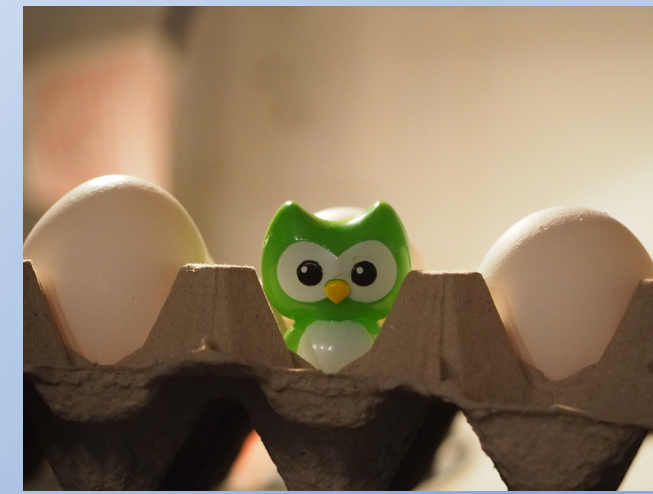
The distress associated with sticky thinking ranges from annoying, such as when a song gets stuck in your mind, to highly distressing. To add insult to injury, feeling upset strengthens the stickiness of these thoughts, fueling a vicious cycle. An example would be in individuals who struggle with insomnia, or trouble falling or staying asleep. They tend to feel upset that sticky thinking is preventing them from sleeping, and harping on this difficulty only makes it harder.

Self-doubt is another factor that contributes to the distress related to sticky thinking. If you imagine fire representing distress, and gasoline representing sticky thinking, self-doubt is like oxygen fueling the flames. For example, you might remember shutting off the basement lights, and yet still ask yourself, “Are you sure you shut them off?” You believe that the only way to feel better is to check again to make sure that the lights are off, even if you have already checked several times.

Often, sticky thinking reflects at least somewhat inaccurate perceptions that are biased by emotions. An example is the assumption that “I feel foolish” means “I am foolish.” Similarly, feeling anxious does not automatically make the situation bad or scary. For example, feeling anxious before an exam is a situation that is not physically threatening and for which feeling anxious might actually help you study more and perform better.



Sticky Thinking is Intrusive



Sticky thinking is the unexpected visitor you don't want to have and who won't leave. While we can't control what thoughts we have, generally we can redirect them. For example, I might crave ice cream and then tell myself I will have some after I eat dinner. In contrast, sticky thinking feels uncontrollable, as if it has a mind of its own. This is especially felt by those who try to suppress thoughts only to have them persist more intensely.

Part of coping with sticky thinking is regaining control over how you respond to it.



Examples of "Sticky Thinking":

Sticky Worrying



Sticky Mulling

Sticky Magical Thinking





Sticky Worrying



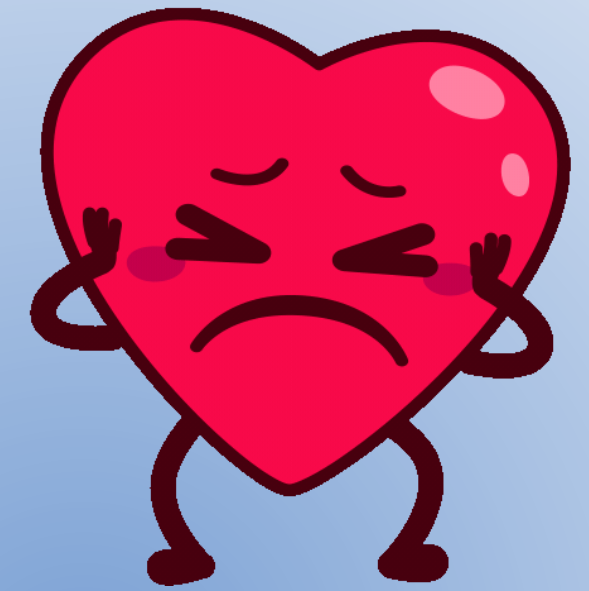
Worrying tends to entail “what if” and “future-oriented thoughts.” It might concern topics that we all worry about, such as the health and well-being of our loved ones, our school or work performance, or world affairs.

Common-place worrying isn’t a problem when you are able to hit the “pause” button and it does not feel like it is driving you crazy. It enables you to plan ahead and be more successful. If you are worried about how you will perform on an exam, you study harder. If you worry you will not have time in the morning to make lunch for the day, you might prepare it the night before.

Sticky worrying is different. It’s the type of worrying that gets out of hand. With sticky worrying, how much you worry and what kinds of things you worry about are pretty much limitless. An example would be jumping from worrying about having enough time to make lunch to worrying that your lunch will spill all over your desk, to worrying that you are not sleeping because your mind is worrying, and so on.



Sticky Mulling



Unlike sticky worrying, sticky mulling gets stuck in the past. This might entail repeatedly revisiting problems in order to mentally find a solution that can bring peace of mind, such as searching for a rationale to justify a mistake you made. Examples include thinking about being late for work earlier that morning, and then mixing in thoughts about how bad the traffic was, how poorly you slept the night before, and your difficulties with managing time. The thoughts run in circles like a Merry-Go-Round in your mind.

Most of us enjoy solving problems. However, what happens when you come across a problem that does not have a clear fix, such as someone wronging you? Reflecting on problems and reworking information might be useful when taking a math test, but when that thinking becomes sticky, it is generally unhelpful.

For example, mulling over a rude remark someone made about you might help you feel more convinced that they were wrong. However, doing so will not improve the relationship. In addition, it is likely not only to make you feel more miserable, but also to take away attention from more worthwhile present endeavors.

Sticky mulling also leads to distorted views of others, which in turn interfere with relationships. For example, if one person's slight makes it less likely you will trust a new acquaintance, you might be less likely to build a relationship with that person. This in turn feeds the misperception that the friendship is not authentic. Overall, sticky mulling not only subdues happiness, but also dampens the ability to create positive experiences in the present.



Sticky Magical Thinking



Like sticky worrying, sticky magical thinking also focuses on trying to control the outcome of a situation. However, in this case it pertains to the notion that you can influence how things turn out by doing something that has no bearing on the circumstances. Also, sticky magical thinking can be focused on the future or past, specifically in imagining that a scenario is more likely to happen because you envisioned it, or that you somehow caused an outcome simply by imagining it beforehand.

For example, let's say you are angry with a friend, and you imagine her birthday party being canceled by a storm. There's no harm in this fleeting thought, but if it gets stuck in your mind and you give it importance, it starts to feel like a problem. To take the example one step further, let's say the day for the party comes, and it gets canceled due to poor weather. If you get stuck on the thought that your imagination somehow ruined your friend's special day, that's magical thinking that's past-oriented. Again, if that's just a fleeting thought, it could just be a humorous bit of nonsense. After all, you know you do not have the power to create storms. But you can't stop thinking that the situation is your fault.

What to Do About Sticky Thinking

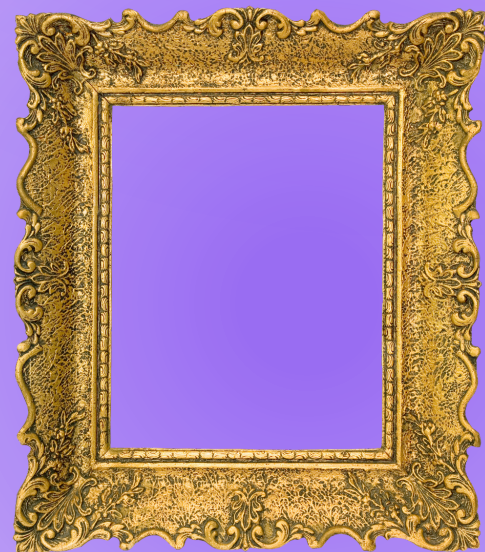
There are several interventions that can be helpful in taming sticky thinking. These can be condensed into the following 3 steps:

The 3 steps for addressing sticky thinking are:

1. Be Aware and Slow Down

2. Accept Sticky Thinking and at the Same Time Reframe It.

3. Create a Cut Off and Seek Social Support



Step 1: Be Aware and Slow Down



Coping with sticky thinking takes effort and focus. Therefore, the first step is to increase awareness of your thoughts and feelings, and to slow down your body and mind. This might seem to contradict what your goals are at the moment. For example, your instinctual response to not being able to fall asleep might be to try harder to fall asleep by staying in bed. However, in this case, it is more helpful to take a break from trying to sleep by engaging in a relaxing activity in a different room (e.g. <https://stanfordhealthcare.org/medical-treatments/c/cognitive-behavioral-therapy-insomnia/procedures/stimulus-control.html>). As another example, you might want to snap at someone who upset you rather than pause and reflect on the situation before reacting. Therefore, while being aware and slowing down sounds easy on the surface, it will take practice.

Be Aware



You want to recognize that you are engaging in sticky thinking. The way to do this is to check in with how your body feels, your emotional state, and what kind of thoughts are popping up in your mind. Look for red flags, such as feeling “off” in your:

-Body: Tired, Hungry, Hot, Restless, Tight in your muscles.

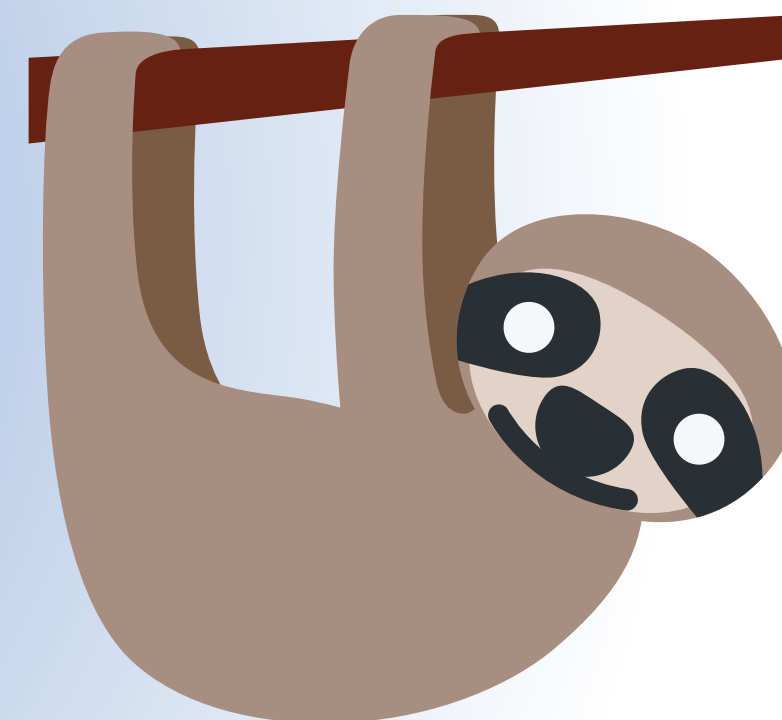
-Emotions: Anxious, Sad, Angry, etc.

-Thoughts: On the spot, you can look for signs of unhelpful thinking patterns, such as thinking in absolutes (“I always mess up”), catastrophizing (“I am going to get fired because I was late one day”), or emotional reasoning (“I feel dumb, so I must be dumb”).

Also, it is helpful to say to yourself “I’m in sticky mind right now.”



Slow Down



To slow down, first seek “active rest,” meaning intentionally choosing an activity that will facilitate an emotional reset.

Such activities should be completed with the intention of calming your body. Worry and anxiety are associated with changes in your autonomic nervous system (which controls involuntary functions like breathing and digestion) that, in turn, can worsen anxiety (e.g. Lynch, 2018).

For example, worrying about your child getting to school on time might activate the “flight or fight” response of your sympathetic nervous system, increasing heart rate and respiration as well as other bodily responses.

This in turn signals the emotion-centered parts of the brain to generate anxiety.

In Radically Open Dialectical Behavior Therapy (RO-DBT) (Lynch 2018), suggestions for influencing the nervous system’s stress response include having a cold or warm drink, listening to relaxing music, or my personal favorite, simply leaning back and taking a deep breath while changing your facial expression to show more openness. RO-DBT practitioners specifically recommend using a closed mouth smile while raising your eyebrows.

Step 2: Accept Sticky Thinking and, at the Same Time, Reframe It



Accept Sticky Thinking 1

When it comes to what to do about sticky thinking, an important step is to frame your goal as being able to live with it as opposed to trying to get rid of it all together. This might appear to contradict the suggestion to change sticky thinking, as implied by the next part about reframing it. However, there is also the reasoning that accepting circumstances is a precursor to changing how they impact you. In this case, what you want to focus on is changing your response to the thoughts as opposed to completely preventing them in the first place.



Accept Sticky Thinking 2

What goes hand in hand with accepting sticky thoughts is the stoic philosophy of "Do what you can, with what you've got, where you are," and being able to adapt to circumstances by being OK with a situation that is "good enough" (communication with W. Irvine, January, 2022). For example, you might want to dine at a fancy restaurant with a companion, but you recognize that you had just as much fun with the person at a fast-food restaurant. You prioritize what you value and recognize when striving for better does not make sense or is not meaningful in the long run.



Reframe Sticky Thinking 1

Next, reframe sticky thoughts so that they are less absolute (i.e. less “all-or-nothing”), and more holistic (i.e. seeing the big picture as opposed to hyper-focusing on one aspect of a problem). The best way to describe reframing is to imagine taking a picture and putting it in a more appealing frame. For example, instead of framing a failed exam as a reflection of one’s failure as a person, imagine placing this event in a frame that redefines the event as a learning experience, or a personal challenge to perform better on the next exam (e.g. Irvine, 2019).

What helps with this is remembering that even if you believe the sticky thoughts are at least in part accurate, they are not serving you. For example, getting stuck on the moment that you forgot your neighbor’s name is not going to undo your mistake, worrying about rain on the day of your picnic will not change the forecast, and worrying about not being able to fall asleep will only make it more difficult to fall asleep.

Reframe Sticky Thinking 2

At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that “sticky thinking” can be helpful in certain situations. Doing so can lead to reframing it into more productive thinking. Specifically, worrying can be reframed as planning, and mulling can be reframed as reflection. For instance, as mentioned above, worrying about an exam motivates you to study more for it. Self-reflection can guide future decisions and behavior. For example, when I was 9- or 10-years-old, I rode my bike across the street without looking both ways, and I almost got hit by a car. I still remember the guilt and shame I experienced for days afterwards. I believe that mulling over the event seared it into my memory and contributed to my cautiousness when crossing roads.



Step 3: Create a Cut off for Sticky Thinking by Visualizing it and Seeking Social Support



Visualizing Sticky Thinking 1



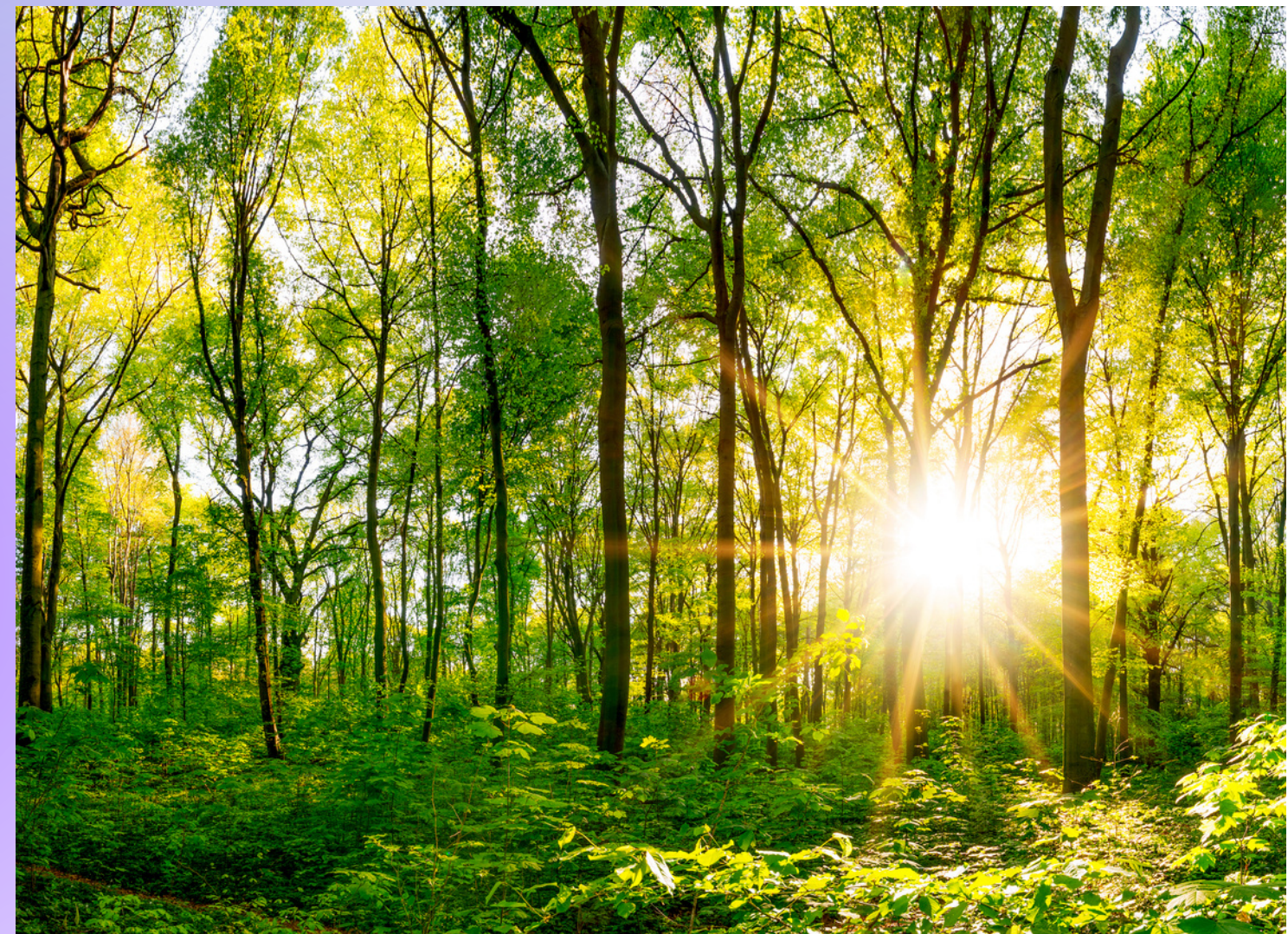
The repetitive nature of sticky thinking perpetuates its distressing and intrusive nature. Creating a cut-off at which point you will think of other topics will weaken this cycle by enabling you to limit the amount of time and energy exerted towards it.

In order to create a cut-off, you first need to understand the extent to which the thinking is impacting you. This will increase your motivation to create the cut-off and shape realistic goals. Think of this as being similar to wanting to cut down on screen time. You would want to monitor how much time you are spending on screens throughout the process and how you are using screens (e.g. for work versus social media). What helps with understanding how much time your mind is engaged in sticky thinking is to use visualization. For example, with sticky worrying, you can think of a pie chart representing your waking hours in a typical day. Then, ask yourself what percentage of that pie is spent worrying. Write down your worries and see how many of them were productive.

Visualization can then be used to assist with cutting yourself off after indulging in the sticky thinking for a limited amount of time. In the case of sticky worrying, you can imagine placing the thoughts in an imaginary box and continue placing the thoughts in the box when they sneak out (e.g. Espie, 2020).

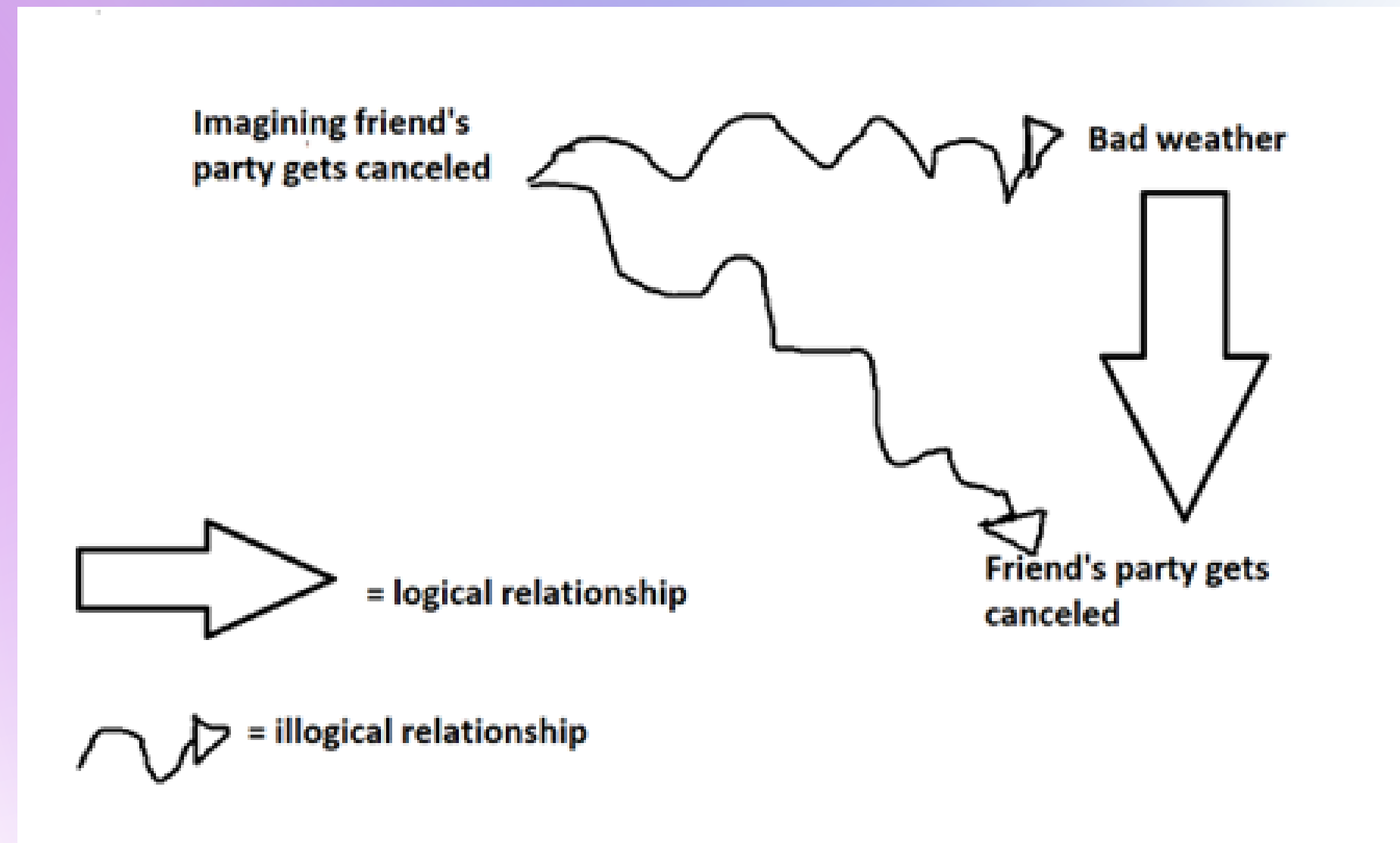
Visualizing Sticky Thinking 2

For sticky mulling, imagine a dark, deserted landscape in your mind as a cue that you are getting stuck in that territory. Keep track of how often your mind goes there. Then, cut yourself off by imagining things that make you happy or that you are grateful for.



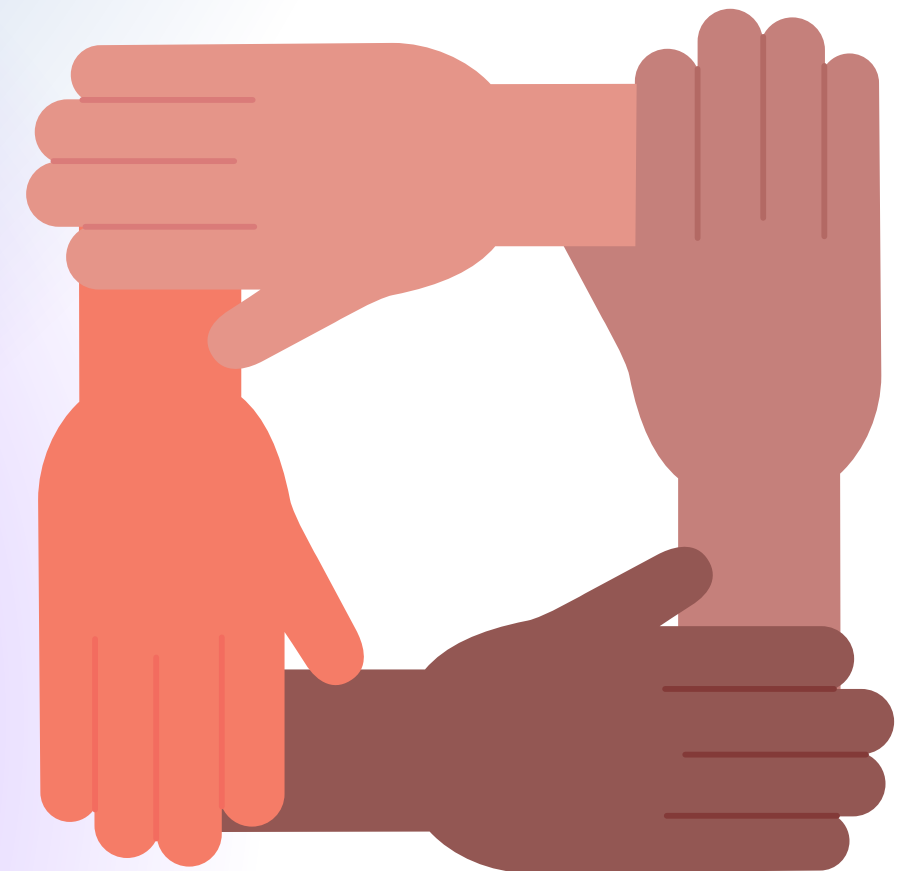
Visualizing Sticky Thinking 3

For sticky magical thinking, you can draw first-then arrows that are either solid or squiggly in order to distinguish what actually caused events from the illogical conclusions you might be drawing in your mind. You can also imagine yourself making a conscious choice to not place importance in whatever is bothering you. You can imagine yourself ignoring sticky thinking and continuing to do so even when it initially continues to prattle. Then, choose to focus on more meaningful activities so that in effect, the thoughts become less powerful.



Seek Social Support

You can also seek social support. This could take the form of talking with friends, family, colleagues, or peers in community groups in which you partake. Others might be able to provide you with validation, possible solutions, and reassurance. There are also free online communities that support mental health through organized virtual meetings (e.g. [LifeLines.com](https://www.lifelines.com.au/)).



Hope for Taming Sticky Thinking

People who struggle with sticky thoughts have much potential to tame them and even make some of them useful. The key is accepting the challenge of living with them, controlling your response to them, and redirecting your energy toward activities and thoughts that are meaningful and give you purpose.

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"Lifelines" website: [lifelines.com](https://www.lifelines.com)