

Managing Overthinking From A Recovering Overthinker

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Overthinking is far more than simply "thinking too much." It is a pattern of excessive analysis, rumination, worry, and self-evaluation that traps us in mental loops without producing meaningful progress. While it often feels as though we are solving problems or preventing mistakes, overthinking is actually an anxiety-driven coping strategy that creates the illusion of control while delaying action. At its core, overthinking is less about intelligence and more about uncertainty, fear, and our brain's natural drive to protect us from potential threats.

Anxiety develops through a complex interaction of biological predisposition, life experiences, environmental stressors, and learned behaviors. Genetics, childhood experiences, trauma, daily habits, physical surroundings, and personal beliefs all influence how we interpret stressful situations. Importantly, stress itself is an external event, while anxiety is our internal response to that event. Two people can experience the same circumstance yet react very differently because of the meaning they assign to it.

The brain plays a central role in this process. Our fight-or-flight response evolved to keep us alive during short periods of danger, not to remain activated indefinitely. Chronic activation floods the body with stress hormones such as cortisol, contributing to fatigue, muscle tension, headaches, poor concentration, digestive problems, sleep disturbances, and increased risk of long-term health problems. Mentally, persistent overthinking can increase anxiety, reduce resilience, distort perception, impair decision-making, and negatively affect relationships, work performance, and overall quality of life.

One consequence of chronic overthinking is decision fatigue. Every decision consumes mental energy, and as cognitive load increases, the quality of our decisions declines. The brain's prefrontal cortex, responsible for planning, reasoning, and judgment, becomes less efficient when overwhelmed by constant choices, stress, and distractions. The result is procrastination, indecision, impulsive choices, perfectionism, and the tendency to avoid decisions altogether. Simplifying routines, automating repetitive decisions, reducing digital distractions, and prioritizing important choices early in the day help preserve valuable mental resources.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) provides one of the most effective frameworks for interrupting overthinking. CBT teaches that thoughts, emotions, and behaviors continually influence one another. By identifying cognitive distortions—such as catastrophizing, all-or-nothing thinking, mind reading, emotional reasoning, and fortune telling—we can begin to challenge automatic thoughts rather than accepting them as facts. Structured tools such

as thought records encourage individuals to identify triggering situations, recognize automatic thoughts, evaluate evidence, generate more balanced perspectives, and observe how these changes affect emotions and behavior. Lasting change also requires addressing deeper core beliefs through experimentation rather than relying on logic alone.

Awareness is the foundation for change. Instead of becoming consumed by anxious thoughts, individuals can learn to observe them with curiosity rather than judgment. Tracking triggers, identifying recurring stories, distinguishing problem solving from rumination, and labeling recurring thought patterns transform vague anxiety into specific, manageable problems. Practical exercises such as thought logs, trigger journals, and "Thinking vs. Doing" audits help reveal where mental energy is being spent without producing meaningful action.

Ultimately, the antidote to overthinking is action. Confidence is not something that appears before taking action—it develops after repeatedly proving to ourselves that we can tolerate uncertainty and handle the outcome. Waiting for complete certainty only reinforces anxiety because certainty is unattainable. Instead, progress comes from taking small, visible actions despite discomfort. Techniques such as the 15-minute action sprint, the one-visible-move rule, and breaking projects into manageable steps reduce the friction between intention and behavior. Small, consistent actions gradually replace self-doubt with self-trust.

Developing healthier mental habits also requires shifting perspective. Focusing on what we can control rather than what we cannot, practicing gratitude, remaining present instead of dwelling on the past or future, and replacing self-criticism with self-compassion all reduce anxiety's grip. Likewise, improving time management, simplifying daily routines, setting boundaries around technology, and creating environments that reduce unnecessary stress help preserve cognitive resources for what truly matters.

The central message is simple: overthinking is not a personality trait or a character flaw—it is a learned pattern of responding to uncertainty. It can be understood, interrupted, and changed. Lasting improvement comes not from eliminating uncertainty, but from learning to regulate our nervous system, challenge unhelpful thinking, conserve our mental energy, and repeatedly choose purposeful action over endless analysis. Clarity does not precede action; clarity is the result of action.

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