

What Happens When You Overthink

When you overthink, you worry and ruminate over conversations and actions for far longer than what is helpful. It's fine to practice some caution when making big decisions, but overthinking can kick in even when making small, otherwise meaningless choices. You may want to talk to someone you don't know at a party, but as soon as the thought enters your mind, you just can't help but think about how the situation could spiral into chaos. What if you walk over and make a fool out of yourself? What if they don't like you, and they tell everyone they don't like you, and now everyone at the party hates you? It's incredibly unlikely this will happen, but your brain convinces you it's actually the most likely result of a benign action. You begin to obsess over these extremely negative outcomes, with no space in your head for any potential positive results.

Because you subconsciously predict bad outcomes over good ones every time, overthinking encourages you to be more pessimistic. When you worry about what will happen if you say this or do that, you come up with only negative answers to the question. Maybe you also think about potential good outcomes, but they seem much less likely than the bad ones. In reality, the balance is completely reversed; your mind leaps right to the worst case scenario, but this is rarely the most likely outcome. It is more common to achieve a good or at least natural outcome than it is to have your attempt to leave your comfort zone end in catastrophic failure, but your mind prioritizes the bad over the good.

How overthinking Impacts your Thoughts

Overthinking gets you stuck in a cycle of worry. These thought patterns make it harder to view the world in an enlightened light. You jump to conclusions, shooting yourself down before you even give yourself a chance to try and before anyone else can do it for you. You have trouble engaging in situations where you cannot be certain of the outcome. Your thoughts spiral long into the night, which can lead to insomnia. Everywhere you turn, fear and anxiety is prevalent.

Irrational Expectations

It's easy to fear the future when you believe that bad outcomes are so much more common than good ones. Overthinking just reinforces the irrational outcomes your mind comes up with and throws away the more rational expectations you should set for yourself. When your thoughts constantly tell you how situations can go from bad to worse, it is hard not to see every unknown outcome as a potential bomb waiting for you to cut the wrong wire.

Irrational expectations can also be directed at yourself. You definitely want to avoid slipping up as you fear the consequences, so you convince yourself that you must act perfectly at all times. It is important that even a small mishap could lead to ruin in your mind. However, no one can really be perfect. When you force expectations of perfection on yourself, any minor setback feels like a catastrophe. You are much harder on yourself than you would be if you recognised that everyone makes mistakes and these mistakes rarely lead to the terrible outcomes you fret.

Anxiety Over unknown variables

It's natural to be cautious about the unknown, but overthinking brings this circumspection to a whole new level. If you can't be certain about an outcome even after thinking it over for minutes or even hours, unknown variables become much more frightening. This can lead you to avoid having new experiences and reject trying new things just because you are afraid of the possibility of failure.

Insomnia From Circling Thoughts...

It is hard to fall asleep when you are focused on your worries for the next day, or when you are endlessly trying to dissect an interaction you had earlier. It is sometimes possible to distract yourself from anxious thoughts during the day, but at night when there are no distractions, these thoughts return. You can lay awake in bed for hours replaying something that happened earlier that day or even many years prior. The more your thoughts keep you up late, the later you end up sleeping in, throwing off your sleep cycle. Insomnia can lead to constant fatigue and exhaustion as your mind struggles to function on a lack of sleep and an unstable sleeping schedule.

As an example, consider someone who is afraid of speaking on the phone. They avoid making phone calls whenever possible, so they never get any experience with it. In their minds, speaking on the phone only ever leads to anxiety and discomforts, and they don't have any good experiences to disprove their worries with. They perpetuate their fear and keep themselves locked in the worry cycle, never picking up the phone, without an end in site.

The Worry Cycle

Worry begets more worry because it keeps you from disproving your fears. When you are so afraid of a possibility that you don't even make an attempt, you pass by the opportunity to ease your worries. The longer you go without facing your fears, the bigger those fears become in your mind, leading you to worry about them even more.

The Physical Affects of Overthinking

Overthinking doesn't just impact your mentality. It can also affect your physical well-being. In some cases, this is because your fear drives you away from healthy activities like exercise and getting sunlight. For example, maybe you fear being judged while working out in front of others so you avoid the gym, allowing your physical health to suffer. More commonly, the physical harm comes in the form of increased stress levels.

Rising Stress Levels

Anxiety raises the production of the stress hormone cortisol in your body. It is okay to have brief, limited periods of stress, like when you have a big test in school or a project at work and you need a little extra motivation to get your work done. Consistent levels of stress, on the other hand, can lead to “serious health problems, such as heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, and other illnesses, including mental disorders such as depression or anxiety”. The long-term stress that overthinking causes is bad for your heart, and it can lead to health problems that are really worth worrying over.

Your physical and mental health are connected. Anything that harms your mental well-being puts more strain on your body in the form of stress, and physical pains can worsen mental distress. In order to live a healthier life, you must reduce both the physical and mental harm created by overthinking. In order to do so, you must consider what your issue with overthinking is.

Chapter 2: Why You Overthink

People are naturally curious about things that are personally relevant to them. We seek out answers anywhere we can find them, and when we don't get a clear answer, we tend to worry over the question in the back of our minds because we aren't able to let our curiosity go. Naturally, our own interactions are very personally relevant, so we are driven to question them and look for answers. When we don't get these answers, we go into overthinking mode.

Overthinking occurs because you cannot reach one answer that you are completely certain of. Anyone can predict the future, and no one can know what is going on inside someone else's head. Because you don't know how the meeting tomorrow is going to turn out, or you don't know what that person you spoke to earlier really thinks of you, your natural need for an answer drives you to keep working the question over in your mind. Rather than give you a concrete answer and easing your thoughts, you usually just end up making your fears worse.

A Desire for Certainty

The less you know about something, the harder it is for you to prepare yourself for it. Part of overthinking is looking for a reasonable answer for your question, but you're working with a data set that is severely lacking. You want to know what will happen if you go to someone and start talking to them, but until you do, you don't know enough about them to figure out how they'll respond. This is especially true if your anxiety and overthinking drives you to avoid conversations with new people, creating a repetitive cycle.

If you don't have any experience or information about a situation, you have to consider all outcomes equally likely, even whether this isn't really true. The likelihood that the person you start talking to will be receptive to conversation seems just as likely as the chance they might decide they hate you and never want to talk to you again. Because you can't know anything for sure, and you won't let the idea of knowing for sure go, you keep thinking about the situation long after you should have just made a decision.

Observing Over the Past

Overthinking can also manifest in obsessing over the past, the same way you try to predict the future. If you tend to fixate on past events, you have probably made an otherwise unremarkable event into a big deal in your head. This lets the little things in life take up more headspace than they are really worth.

Obsession over past interactions usually comes from a love to read other people. This can be common for people with low self-esteem. You want to know how you came off and what other people think of you, but instead of taking their words at face value, you look for evidence that points to them secretly hating you. Your own self-critical thoughts are projected onto others. You replay the situation over and over again in your thoughts, identifying all the times when you messed up, even though the other person has probably long since forgotten.

A Lack of Experience

People who overthink tend to worry about things they haven't done in a long time. The less experience you have with something, or the longer it's been since you did something, the easier it is to assume things will go poorly. If you had one bad experience that put you off something forever, your only memory of the thing you're avoiding is the bad experience, with no positive or neutral experiences to balance it out. Every time you think about it, you are inclined to believe that things will go just as badly this time. These fears are rummaged in self-doubt, which holds you back from confronting the things that scare you.

Self-Doubt

Every situation could have good outcomes and bad outcomes. Self-doubt is what convinces you that the bad outcomes are more likely than the good ones. When you doubt yourself, you immediately assume that a situation will end poorly for you, often before you even let yourself try. The more you hold yourself back from making an attempt when a new opportunity comes your way, the more you will incarnate these self-critical beliefs. This leads to the repetition of thoughts such as, "I'm not good enough to succeed so I shouldn't even try," and, "They were just pretending to like me but really they can't stand me." If you don't give yourself the chance to prove yourself wrong, you will continue believing these things to be true, which only makes self-doubt worse and leads to spiralling negative thoughts.

Spiraling Thoughts

The pattern of behaviour that leads to overthinking is as follows: You encounter a problem, your brain tries to figure out what will happen now that the problem exists, and you lack the experience to make an informed decision. You start out by making reasonable predictions, but your thoughts quickly skew negative as a result of self-doubts and a lack of confidence. Your thoughts speed up and

rapidly spiral downwards, leading you to the worst possible conclusion rather than ones that are actually more likely.

You may ask yourself, “So what if I spend more time thinking about things than other people? Doesn’t that just mean I’m cautious?” But over thinking is more than just to be cautious. Caution helps us avoid mistakes, while overthinking only gets in our way by preventing us from taking any action at all.

The real danger of overthinking, the thing that separates it from more productive thoughts that might otherwise be a vindicated caution over an important decision, is that overthinking doesn’t help you reach a decision. It leads to inaction through a passive unwillingness to try and actively prevents you from making a decision. Problem-solving also involves thinking critically about a problem and trying to predict what might happen if you try different methods, but the difference here is that “problem-solving involves thinking about a solution. Overthinking involves dwelling on the problem” (Morin, 2019, para. 9). This is what makes overthinking so harmful. We think about the problem, not the possible solutions, so we don’t take action and ultimately end up hurting ourselves more as a result.

Chapter 3: Mental Exercises for Overthinking

You know why overthinking is so bad and why you engage in it, but how do you stop? When your thoughts are racing, the first step is to bring them back under control. Find ways to bring your thoughts to a halt, at which point you can consider if they're helpful, true thoughts, or if they are just the product of pessimistic thinking.

Mental exercises can help you overcome these negative thought patterns and recenter your thoughts. When you give yourself space to breathe, you keep yourself from getting wrapped up in your spiraling thoughts. From a calmer perspective, it is easier for you to take a more rational view of the situation and quit overthinking.

Slow Your Thoughts With Meditation

Meditation is an excellent way to regain feelings of peace and calm in the middle of worry and fear. Rather than letting you dwell on your concerns, meditation re-directs your focus towards things you have control over like your breath and your immediate surroundings. Concentrating on breathing control forces your mind to snap out of its thought spiral and helps you take a step back from the troubling situation.

Meditation is also useful for grounding yourself more firmly. When you overthink, you lose yourself in the “what ifs” rather than focusing on what is. Meditation directs your thoughts to what you are experiencing instead of what you might experience. This reduces the risk of panic that might otherwise overwhelm you.

Focus on your breathing

Breathing is more powerful than most people believe. There is a reason why a sports coach or personal trainer might direct their trainees to “breathe through the pain”—breathing takes our mind off the sources of pain and worry in our lives, whether they are producing physical pain or emotional pain. Breathing also gives you an outlet for your stress, as you can imagine your stress leaving your body with each breath and feel the change in very real time.