

Breaking Free from Overthinking

Quieting the noise and finding more peace

Overthinking can make your mind feel as though it never gets to put anything down. A conversation ends, but you replay it. A decision is made, but you keep reopening it. Something might happen next week and your brain begins rehearsing every possible version today. When depression is already draining your energy, this constant mental activity can leave you exhausted without having physically done very much at all.

Often, overthinking is not pointless. Your mind may be trying to protect you from making a mistake, being rejected, getting hurt or being caught unprepared. It searches for certainty because uncertainty feels uncomfortable. The problem is that some questions cannot be solved by thinking harder. Instead of reaching an answer, you travel around the same thoughts until they begin to feel more convincing simply because you have heard them so many times.

Depression can make this loop particularly harsh. Thoughts may repeatedly return to what you did wrong, what you should have done differently, opportunities you believe you missed or ways you think you have disappointed people. The past becomes something you keep trying to edit even though it cannot be changed, while the future becomes something you try to control before it has happened.

When thinking becomes a loop

Useful thinking usually moves somewhere. It helps you make a decision, understand something, solve a problem or choose an action. Overthinking often feels busy but stays in the same place. You may ask the same question in slightly different ways: 'What if I had said this?' 'What if they meant that?' 'What if I make the wrong choice?' The repetition can create the impression that there must be an answer if you just keep going.

One way to notice the difference is to ask: *Is this thought giving me new information, or am I reviewing information I already have?* If nothing new has appeared after several rounds, the next helpful step may not be more analysis. It may be rest, action, acceptance of uncertainty or deliberately moving your attention elsewhere.

You do not have to believe every thought

A thought can feel urgent without being accurate. It can be familiar without being true. Depression can produce thoughts such as 'nothing will change', 'I always ruin things', or 'everyone is coping except me'. Trying to forcibly remove these thoughts can sometimes make them louder. Another option is to notice them as mental events: 'My mind is giving me the thought that I will fail.' That small change in language can create a little distance between you and the thought.

Try this: Instead of asking 'Is this thought true?' every time, sometimes ask 'Is continuing to think about this helping me right now?'

A personal reflection

I think one of the hardest things about overthinking is that it can look like responsibility. We tell ourselves we are being careful, preparing properly or making sure we understand. Sometimes we are. But there is a point where preparation becomes punishment. If you have already considered the information available and your mind is asking you to go around once more, you are allowed to stop.

Stopping does not mean you have solved everything. It means you are recognising that your brain deserves rest even when life still contains uncertainty. You do not need to earn that rest by finding the perfect answer first.

Exercise: Is This Problem Solvable Right Now?

Choose one thought that has been circling. Work through the boxes slowly. The aim is not to eliminate the thought but to decide what kind of response it actually needs.

What keeps going around my mind?	Is there a practical action I can take now?
What is outside my control?	What could I give my attention to instead?

If there is an action: make it small and specific. Send the email. Write down the question. Make the appointment. Decide when you will revisit the problem. **If there is no action:** practise naming that too - 'There is nothing more I can do with this tonight.'

Creating an ending point

Overthinking often has no natural finish line, so it can help to create one. You might give yourself ten minutes to write the thoughts down, then close the page. You might decide that a work problem will be reconsidered tomorrow at 10 a.m., not repeatedly throughout the evening. You might tell yourself that you are allowed to make a 'good enough' decision with the information you currently have.

This is not about never reflecting. Reflection is valuable. The difference is whether the thinking serves your life or consumes it. Peace does not require a completely silent mind; sometimes it begins when you stop treating every thought as an instruction that needs your immediate attention.

Books chosen for this piece

David A. Clark & Aaron T. Beck - *The Anxiety and Worry Workbook*

This workbook uses cognitive-behavioural approaches to understand worry and anxious thinking. I have chosen it because readers who want structured exercises may benefit from seeing how thoughts, predictions and behaviours reinforce one another. It is practical and more workbook-like than the reflective books elsewhere in this series, so it may suit somebody who wants something to actively work through.

Ethan Kross - *Chatter*

Kross explores the internal voice and why it can become repetitive, critical or overwhelming. It fits this resource because overthinking often feels like being trapped in a conversation with yourself that never reaches an ending. The book looks at ways of gaining psychological distance and changing how we relate to that internal dialogue.

Jon Kabat-Zinn - *Wherever You Go, There You Are*

This is a mindfulness-based book rather than a manual for stopping thoughts. I have chosen it because sometimes the alternative to overthinking is not finding a better thought but practising being present without needing to solve everything. Its short sections can also be easier to approach when concentration is limited.

When your brain starts again

The loop may return. That does not mean the exercise failed. Overthinking is often habitual and may become stronger during stress, tiredness or low mood. Each time you notice the loop, you have another opportunity to ask whether there is something to do or whether this is a moment to step away from solving.

When additional support matters

If repetitive thinking, depression or anxiety is significantly affecting sleep, work, relationships or everyday functioning, a GP or mental-health professional can help you explore appropriate support. If you feel unable to keep yourself safe or think you may act on thoughts of harming yourself, seek urgent help. In the UK, NHS 111 can advise on urgent care; in an immediate emergency call 999 or go to A&E.;

Message from Maggie

You do not have to solve your whole life tonight. You do not have to replay every conversation until you find the perfect version of what you should have said. Your mind may be trying very hard to protect you, but it is allowed to rest too. When the thoughts begin circling, ask whether there is one thing you can actually do. If there is, do that one thing. If there is not, give yourself permission to put the thought down for now and move towards a little more light.

Space to Breathe Therapy
Support Hub - Depression