

Overthinking What to Say

When every conversation feels like a mental rehearsal

Overthinking conversations can happen before, during and long after an interaction. You may rehearse possible answers, monitor every word while speaking, then replay the conversation afterwards looking for mistakes. This can occur with anxiety, rejection sensitivity, previous criticism, trauma, ADHD, autism, masking, perfectionism or simply after difficult social experiences. It is not one single diagnosis and the reason will be different for each person.

Before the conversation

The mind may begin preparing long before anything has happened. You might plan opening sentences, imagine every possible question, predict how the other person will react and prepare several versions of your answer. Preparation can be useful, but it becomes exhausting when you feel you must anticipate every possibility before you are safe enough to speak.

For some neurodivergent people, scripting gives structure to unpredictable communication. It can reduce processing demands and help organise thoughts. The difficulty comes when the script becomes a rule: if the conversation moves in an unexpected direction, anxiety rises because the prepared route is no longer available.

During the conversation

Instead of simply participating, part of your attention may be watching yourself participate. Am I talking too much? Did I interrupt? Was that too direct? What is my face doing? Should I ask a question now? Did their tone change? This self-monitoring uses working memory and can make it harder to hear, process and respond naturally. Ironically, trying extremely hard to communicate perfectly can make conversation feel less accessible.

Afterwards: the replay

Once the interaction ends, the mind may start reviewing it. A pause, facial expression or single sentence can become the focus of repeated analysis. You may remember what you wish you had said, worry that you sounded rude or strange, or mentally rewrite your response. The replay often promises certainty - 'if I think about it enough, I will know whether I got it wrong' - but ambiguous social situations rarely offer complete certainty.

Common patterns

Pattern	What may be underneath
Thinking of every possible response	Trying to remove uncertainty before speaking.
Worrying about the 'wrong' thing	Fear of criticism, misunderstanding or rejection.
Replaying conversations	Searching retrospectively for evidence of a mistake.
Overthinking texts	Missing tone and facial cues can increase uncertainty.
Pressure to say the 'right' thing	Perfectionism or learned fear of social mistakes.
Not knowing what to say next	Processing time may be needed, especially under pressure.
Feeling exhausted	Conversation has involved monitoring, predicting and performing as well as talking.

When texting becomes harder than talking

Messages give extra processing time, but that can also create more room for editing and doubt. A short message may be rewritten repeatedly to control tone, punctuation and possible interpretations. Try separating **clarity** from **certainty**: you can check that a message is understandable and respectful, but you cannot guarantee how another person will interpret every word.

A useful limit is one content check and one tone check. If you are still changing tiny details after that, ask whether the editing is improving the message or only temporarily reducing anxiety.

Making Conversation Feel Less Like a Test

The aim is not to become a perfect conversationalist. It is to reduce the amount of mental work required to communicate and to build tolerance for the fact that ordinary conversations contain pauses, misunderstandings, repairs and imperfect wording.

Give yourself processing time

You are allowed to pause. Useful phrases include: 'Give me a moment to think about that', 'I know what I mean but I need a second to find the words', 'Can I come back to you on that?' or 'Could you put that in writing?' Processing time is a communication tool, not a failure.

Use preparation without creating a script prison

Before an important conversation, prepare the **three things you most need to communicate** rather than predicting every sentence. Write keywords rather than a complete script. If the conversation changes direction, return to those three points. For appointments or meetings, taking notes or bringing a written list can reduce pressure on memory and language retrieval.

Try the 'good enough' message rule

Before sending a text or email, ask: Is it understandable? Is it respectful? Does it communicate what I actually need? If yes, it may already be good enough. Perfect wording cannot remove every possibility of misunderstanding. Healthy communication includes clarification and repair afterwards.

After a conversation: facts before interpretations

Facts: What was actually said or done? **Interpretation:** What am I afraid it meant? **Missing information:** What do I not know? **Alternative:** Is there another reasonable explanation? **Action:** Does anything genuinely need clarification, or does my nervous system need time to settle?

Conversation reset worksheet

The situation: _____
What I am worried I said or did wrong: _____
The facts I actually have: _____
What I am assuming: _____
What information is missing: _____
What else could be true: _____
Do I need to clarify, apologise, wait, regulate, or let this one go? _____

For people supporting someone who overthinks conversations

Do not rush them simply because you are comfortable answering quickly. Give questions one at a time and allow processing space. Be direct when something matters rather than relying on hints. If they ask whether you are upset, answer clearly rather than expecting them to infer it from tone. Avoid mocking rehearsed speech or repeated checking; instead help distinguish between information that can be clarified and uncertainty that has to be tolerated.

When it is affecting everyday life

Consider additional support if conversational anxiety is leading to severe avoidance, panic, isolation, repeated relationship difficulties, inability to attend appointments or work, or hours of distress after ordinary interactions. Support may focus on anxiety, trauma, communication, self-compassion, assertiveness, emotional regulation or neurodivergent needs depending on what is driving the pattern.

A message to leave with

You do not need the perfect sentence to deserve to be heard. Conversation is not an exam with one correct response. People pause, misunderstand each other, clarify, repair and try again. Preparation can support you, but you are also allowed to speak imperfectly, take time to process and discover what you think while you are talking.

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