

STOP OVER THINKING

The 34 Best Techniques to Reducing Stress,
Controlling Your Mind, Overcoming Negative
Thoughts and Living a Worry-Free Life



ALEXANDER CLARKE

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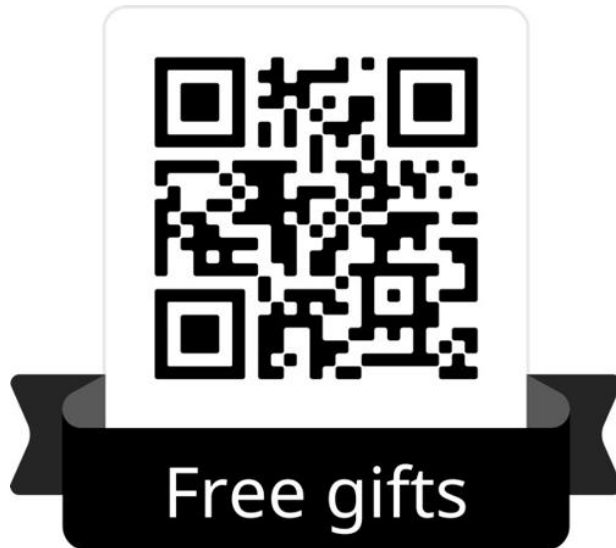
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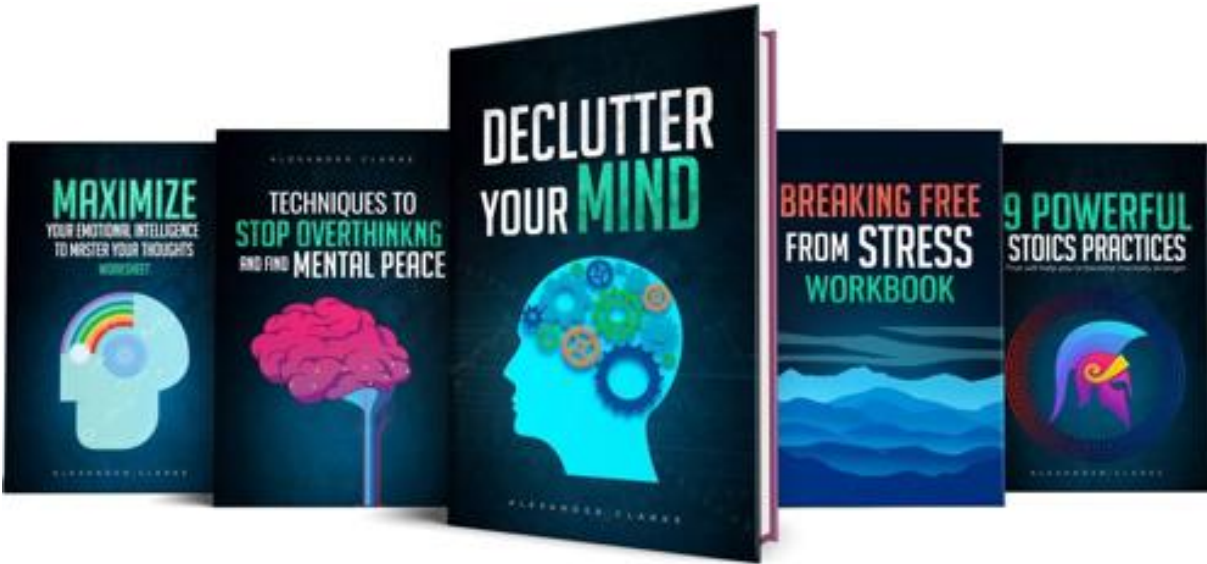
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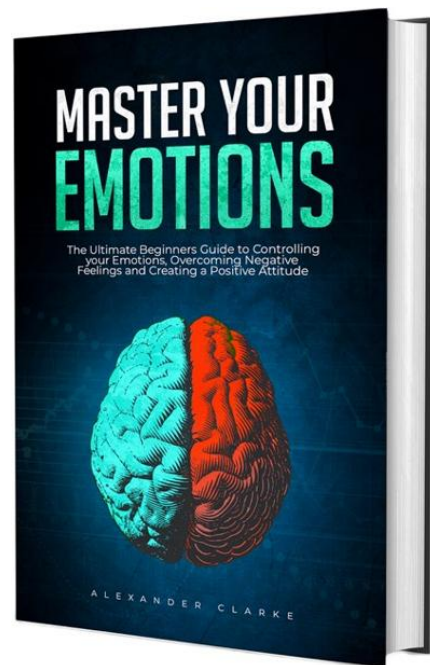


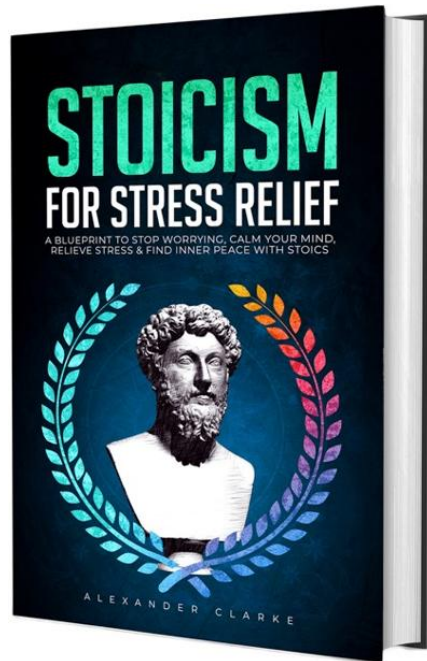
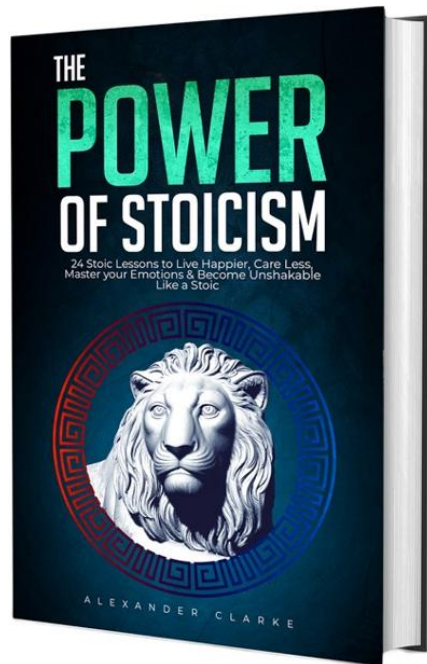
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INTRODUCTION

‘Many people imagine they are thinking when they are simply rearranging their prejudices.’

– **William James.**

Thinking about who we are, our past, desires, feelings, and hopes is a tricky task that some people spend a lot of effort trying to avoid. Those people keep away from themselves because they are afraid of what they could discover – it could be too painful for them to bear. They fear that they will not like what lies in the background. They could be resentful about the people they love. They might be deeply furious about their boss. They might dislike their child. They might find that they have grounds to feel inadequate and guilty about the errors and mistakes they have made in life. So, they fill up every moment of their day with activities until they have no room to be by themselves and to think.

Then, there is the other camp. The overthinkers. The people who spend most of their days in their heads. Those who are familiar with every mistake they have ever made because they have played it over and over in their minds. Those whose minds convince them that they are nauseatingly compromised in their humanity. These people do not have a lot to hide from themselves. They fill their minds with all kinds of ideas, which sometimes announce their intelligence to the world, but subtly make sure that they have no room to rediscover the feelings of confusion and uncertainty that

lie deep within. They are, simply put, constantly stressed because they are constantly thinking.

Thinking is good, but overthinking is a toxic habit that can cause more harm than many of us realize. Let me ask you a question: how much time do you spend in your head? What percentage of your day is spent thinking, worrying, freaking out, stressing, or whatever other name you call it? Do you have a preoccupied mind? Research shows that for the overthinker, 99% of their thoughts are useless. Imagine that! What if I told you that 90% of your problems would be solved if you stopped overthinking and being anxious about everything?

Overthinking is exhausting. When you overthink, you let your thoughts run circles around your mind, and you get yourself stuck in reverse, unable to make any progress. You start creating bizarre ideas that always contradict one another. 'I am so excited about this job opportunity' becomes 'I wonder whether they like me' and quickly morphs into 'I am so stupid! I should never have said that! They will certainly fire me!' Before you know it, you carry the blame for things that you did not do and start worrying about scenarios that may never happen.

Does that sound familiar? Let me tell you Jack's story. Jack has dealt with anxiety for a long time since his high school days, stemming from the bullying, peer pressure, and expectations about the future. He got into the habit of over analyzing and overthinking to a ridiculous degree. When he started his over-analysis, he was trying to figure out how to balance everything that he needed to get done – his grades, his friendships, and football. It served him for a while, and he kept at it even though he was no longer in high school. Years later, Jack got his first job. His job required that he make decisions fast but his overthinking kept him from delivering results consistently. Eventually, his boss, tired of seeing how Jack's overthinking delayed projects and affected other team members, had to let him go. His overthinking got in the way of his career.

It also cost him his relationship with his girlfriend. After a lot of chaos, he enlisted the help of a psychologist and started acknowledging the problem. He realized how much overthinking ruled his life. In one of his sessions, all

he could say was, ‘it is so exhausting!’ Jack is like many overthinkers. Overthinking is a part of them that they do not want, that they wish they could control. Their minds are ever on high alert and second-guessing. They ask, ‘What if this? What if that?’ about many of the decisions and actions they take.

Maybe your overthinking has not gotten to Jack’s level. You have enough control over your mind to at least be present in meetings, but when you are out of it, your mind does not rest. At night, you re-think every word you said. You restructure conversations and try to interpret other people’s actions. Maybe you have always wanted to be carefree, but you simply cannot figure it out. Your mind is always restless – on overdrive. You create scenarios before they happen and rehearse conversations you have not yet had. Perhaps you ruminate. You always have questions that you long to resolve. You tell yourself that you want closure when really, you are addicted to thinking.

Perhaps, you have been going around in circles in your mind for years, and you are tired of it. You see how it is starting to affect your creativity, your engagement in activities you enjoy, and your relationships. You have tried to will yourself to do better, but it never works. In fact, every time you think about ways to stop overthinking, it ends up creating another cycle that births a feeling of inadequacy over your inevitable defeat. It is as if your mind has a mind of its own. Well, it does not have to be that way. You can stop thoughts that make you anxious and stressed, control your mind, and feel empowered. Before I dig into how you can do that, let me tell you another strange legend.

Harry Houdini, the famous magician, once said that he could escape any jail cell in the world as long as he went into it with his regular clothes. He would be out in an hour, he said. An old jailer heard this claim and accepted the challenge. On that fateful day, many people gathered around the jail, waiting to see it. Houdini walked into the jail confidently and into his cell. After the door was locked, he removed his belt and retrieved a piece of steel he had hidden there. He got to work on the door, and 30 minutes later, he had made no progress. His confident expression disappeared, only to be replaced by sweat and uncertainty.

Two hours later, tired and sweat-drenched, the beaten-down Houdini collapsed in defeat against the door. Surprisingly, the door opened under his weight. It turns out that the door was never locked. But that is not the whole story, is it? The door was locked as far as the man was concerned. To his mind, the best locksmith in the world had installed this door, and no amount of tinkering would get it to bulge. Whether or not this folklore is true is not the point. It teaches us a powerful truth that you will need to remember – the mind is very powerful.

How many doors in your life have you imagined are locked when they were not? How often do you get stuck in your mental prison of overthinking? A problem whose solution was really simple becomes complicated. There is a famous African proverb that translates to, ‘when there is no internal enemy, the enemy outside cannot harm.’ Your mind is more powerful than anything you will ever face. It will tell you lies. It will convince you of limitations you do not really have. It will talk you out of trying things you desperately wish to try. To deal with overthinking is to learn to thank its opinion and then move on because, like in Houdini’s case, the door is only closed in your mind. In reality, it is open. You only need to walk through.

In this book, I will show you exactly how to do that. I spent far too many years overthinking before I decided it was time to turn things around. The day I realized that none of the energy I was spending in my mind was worth it was the day my life started changing. Over many years of interacting with psychology, philosophy, and personal development literature, I learned that I was highly empathetic and passionate, but that concern had turned into an insatiable desire *to feel* that I was doing well – not *to actually do* well. Slowly but surely, I learned to overcome the paralysis. I spent less and less time dissecting conversations. I learned, instead, to make positive contributions to the conversations I was having.

You see, overthinking makes you anxious and stunts your ability to learn and grow. It only shows you the failures. I learned to think better, but the process was not easy. Many of the books I read asked me to ban overthinking. They offered quick guides that simply did not work. It became clear that overthinking is not something with a simple ‘cure.’ In

many ways, it is part of who you are. The more practical approach helps you to use the tendency to overthink as a strength rather than a weakness.

So, in this book, you will learn what overthinking really is, how it starts, and how to use it for good, rather than letting it be a stress trigger. It is not overthinking itself that causes anxiety or stress. It is the content of these thoughts. True, you will sometimes catch yourself caring about things you shouldn't, but as you embrace the lessons in this book, you will learn to let go of the need to control what you can't. You will finally get out of the never-ending thought loop that adds stress to your life. Here, you will find in-depth information about overthinking and practical tips to use psychology and stoicism to deal with negative thoughts, worry, anxiety, and the other things that come with overthinking to build a rumination- and worry-free life and feel empowered to step out and conquer the world.

WHY WON'T IT STOP? WHAT CAUSES OVERTHINKING?

If you lie on your bed at night and cannot sleep for hours because your mind is busy dwelling on all the decisions you made and worrying about what you have to do tomorrow, you are not alone. Research shows that 73% of people between 25 and 35 years old chronically overthink. 52% of those between 45 and 55 years old are also overthinkers. Most times, their overthinking will show up as rumination which includes replaying events of the present and the past with a negative mindset. The result? Stress.

Yet, overthinking is not just about ruminating. When faced with significant life choices like switching careers, choosing a university, getting married, or buying a car, most people spend a lot of time considering the possible outcomes. That is the sensible thing to do – a major life change or expense deserves to be considered thoroughly. The problem with overthinkers is that they do this all the time, for every choice they make. They entertain ‘what ifs’ so much that they become frozen and paralyzed. Chronic overthinking ends up affecting your sleep, relationships, work, and health.

When you overthink, you let your thoughts get in the way of your life. You become unable to disengage from your thoughts to concentrate on something else and of course, all that thinking makes things worse. Unproductivity is one of the hallmarks of overthinking. You end up spending hours thinking about a deadline instead of working to meet that deadline. I have to note here that overthinking is not a synonym for stress and worry. True, it causes stress, but stress about a specific circumstance

eases once that circumstance is dealt with. Stress as a result of overthinking never ceases because overthinking never stops. You overthink about one event and it bleeds into others in the past or the present. Even if they are resolved, you find other things to overthink about.

The point here is that overthinking is unhealthy thinking that hinders decision making and interferes with your well-being or your daily life. It is the act of thinking too much about something or thinking for too long. It is always energy draining rather than empowering. According to research, overthinking increases stress, clouds your judgements, reduces your creativity, and takes away your decision-making ability.

Bear in mind that there is a difference between thinking to problem-solve and overthinking. Problem-solving is about creating a solution. Overthinking dwells on the problem. Overthinking also differs from self-reflection. Healthy self-reflection helps you learn about yourself or gain perspective in a situation. It always has a purpose. Overthinking is aimless. It involves dwelling on how bad you feel as you think about things you cannot control. The difference between self-reflection, problem-solving, and overthinking is not the time you spend thinking. Time you spend problem-solving will be productive. Time you spend overthinking will never enhance your life.

When you realize that you have a tendency to overthink, you have to take steps to make life different, but first, you need to recognize that overthinking does no good. Sometimes you imagine that overthinking somehow averts tragedy. You think that if you do not worry enough or keep bringing the past up, you will somehow experience problems, but that is not true. Overthinking is bad for you. It does nothing to solve or prevent problems.

WHAT TRIGGERS OVERTHINKING?

We want control

At the heart of it, overthinking is a way of reaching for control. It is a way of trying to feel more confident about what is next in life. When you overthink, your brain is in 'analysis mode.' It starts to go through all possible scenarios, trying to predict an outcome that will help lower anxiety. The problem is, your mind never knows when to stop. It always creates another reason to worry.

Perfectionism

It turns out that people motivated by achievement tend to be overthinkers. Overachievers and perfectionists overthink a lot because they fear failure and need to be perfect all the time. They end up replaying and criticizing their mistakes and decisions. They also tend to worry about the judgments of people around them.

Stress and anxiety

Psychologists do not classify overthinking as a mental disorder, but research has linked it to mental health conditions like anxiety disorders, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and obsessive-compulsive disorder. One study found that there was a cyclic relationship between overthinking and some mental health issues, a chicken-egg situation if you will. You can overthink because of high levels of anxiety, depression, and stress. At the same time, overthinking will increase your stress, anxiety, and depression.

Trauma

After a traumatic event, it is typical to become hypervigilant. People who are constantly on high alert tend to overthink. The brain gets stuck in an unnecessary fight-flight-freeze mode as they continue looking for perceived or real threats. For example, if you experienced parental neglect as a child,

or childhood abuse, it changes your brain and you become more prone to overthinking. Your thoughts tend to become obsessive.

Self-doubt and low self-esteem

Any overthinker can easily confirm how overthinking leaves them exhausted and feeling suffocated. Then, at the end of the day, you overthink how you wasted your time overthinking. It disrupts not only your daily life, but your sleep patterns and emotional regulation. Other than stress, anxiety, and trauma, issues pertaining to self-doubt and self-esteem are also tied to overthinking. A person with a low self-esteem is much more likely to overthink than one with a healthy sense of self.

This book will address the triggers of overthinking and provide tools to help you stop overthinking. It will teach you how to embrace mindfulness and awareness at all times so that you can not only notice the way your body reacts when you overthink, but also control your mind and empower yourself. But before we do that, we have to understand where it all started. You see, whether it is trauma, low self-esteem, perfectionism, or whatever other cause of overthinking, there is a common thread – a common link between them.

HOW IT ALL STARTED

When you were born into the world, you joined it with a blank slate. You did not have preconceived beliefs, thoughts, or worries. You were just in the moment and alive, new to everything around you. As the years passed, you started exploring the world around you. Your mind encoded ideas, beliefs, and the messages you were fed by the people around you and the society at large. You heard things like:

'You are way too fat.'

'It is so hard to make money.'

'No one loves you.'

'No one can make a living from art.'

All types of thoughts were passed on to you so you grew up living by them and believing them. In so doing, you mimicked your biggest influences. Now, as an adult, some of these beliefs no longer serve you. They have become limiting beliefs so deeply rooted in your subconscious mind that they stunt you and stop you from creating the kind of life you want. So, when you are overthinking, your mind replays, endorses, and rearranges these prejudices/limiting beliefs, leaving you depleted and hopeless.

You see, the mind is very powerful. As it turns out, you have both a conscious and a subconscious mind. You process information in the conscious mind. It is where you analyze, obsess, or worry irrationally. It gets tired and it sleeps with you when you finally fall asleep. The subconscious mind, on the other hand, is the non-analytical part of your brain. It works like a reservoir. From your childhood, it has been storing beliefs, memories, feelings, and thoughts without your conscious awareness.

Over time, all the ideas, opinions and beliefs that your conscious mind collected get into your subconscious mind. Gradually, your mind gets encoded by the nature of these thoughts and beliefs. You see, the

subconscious mind believes everything. It does not have a filter to differentiate fact from fiction. It is a lot like the soil, accepting both bad and good seeds without discrimination. So, as you grow up, any negative thoughts and limiting beliefs seeping into your mind seep into the subconscious and eventually translate to corresponding action. When you are overthinking, you pull these beliefs and replay them over and over.

That is why it should be no surprise when ‘no one can make a living through art,’ becomes ‘I can’t be a musician and call it a career.’ ‘You’re way too fat,’ becomes a series of self-defeating thoughts whenever you eat ice cream or breathe hard as you climb up the stairs. You doubt anyone who professes their love for you and money becomes ever elusive. Overthinking is repeating those negative things to yourself through time because they are encoded in your subconscious mind. Then, as you do that, they become more ingrained in you. It bears saying that these are just examples, it could be any limiting belief – the process is the same though. Your subconscious mind manifests all that you feed it. It translates your convictions and ideas into mental affirmations and habits.

Jen Sincero once said that people often live an illusion based on someone else’s beliefs. What beliefs are you living by? Are you aware of what is driving your actions and your conscious thoughts? Who is running the show behind the scenes?

YOU CAN CHANGE YOUR THOUGHTS

You may be reading this and wondering whether there is a way out. There is. Your mind is always filtering and endorsing stimuli and information that affirms things you already believe. Psychologists call this ‘confirmation bias’ – the tendency to interpret any new evidence in a way that confirms what you already believe or think. If we are likely to believe what we want to believe, then to really change our lives, we have to change our pre-existing beliefs. We have to wake up, choose to unlearn some things and transform ourselves.

We have to be willing to rid ourselves of the beliefs that control and govern us, but no longer serve us. If you feed your mind with negativity, worry, and fear, they will manifest themselves in reality. Only your conscious mind can reject negative or limiting beliefs. It is the gatekeeper to your convictions. Remember that power. Remember your potential to renew yourself into whoever you want to be. This will take time and will involve a lot of mindfulness and self-awareness (covered in the next chapter), but it is doable.

You have the power to understand yourself better, create, and achieve your goals, conquer fear and become calmer and more enthusiastic as you work toward your dreams. The key is what story you choose to repeat to yourself. Rather than repeating the old story your limiting beliefs tell, you can turn it around. You can choose a new story. You can give yourself the permission to be happy, at peace, fearless, and successful. Allow yourself to be mentally healthy and live a truly meaningful life.

SIGNS YOU ARE OVERTHINKING

Maybe you have read all this and you feel inspired, but are not very sure whether you are an overthinker. It is often hard to recognize the spiral when you are caught in the middle of it. Your brain could even try to convince you that ruminating and worrying is somehow helpful. After all, will you not come up with a better solution and avoid the same mistake in the future? Not always. As we have already established, the opposite is more likely to be true. The more you think, the worse you will feel. The worse you feel, the worse your judgment will be. Recognizing your tendency to overthink is important because your thought patterns influence how you feel, which influences what you do. In order to change something, you need to be aware of it first, so, here are eight signs that you are overthinking:

You become problem focused

When you are overthinking, you lose touch with what you are feeling in the moment and concentrate on the problem and how a similar past event made you feel. Your mind dwells on the problem at hand, whether real or perceived, but without presenting any real possibilities for action or change. All you know is that change needs to happen, but never through you. You lose your ability to accept the things you are facing and you let them bother you, increasing your stress levels. Focusing on the problem associated with overthinking is disempowering. It does not allow you to think clearly or access solutions. It only leaves you feeling overwhelmed.

Rumination

Rumination always magnifies stress. It is the habit of obsessing over the negative things that happened in the past. It comes easily when you are stressed because it starts with a desire to solve the problem. You tell yourself that you need to examine past events to make sense of them and learn from them, but that is hardly ever where you end up. Most people do not start ruminating over their problems on purpose. All they want is to be happy, but they have no idea how to let go of difficult things that happened to them. Sometimes, you ruminate as a way to seek validation that

something should not have happened. When you are ruminating, however, you cannot stop thinking about a specific event and when you think about it a lot, it upsets you.

Rumination has a negative focus which makes it different from problem-solving introspection. It involves going over the details of a situation in your head or sometimes, talking to people about them. The hallmark is going over the same information without changing or moving from a negative mindset. As a rule of thumb, if you feel worse after thinking about an event, you were likely ruminating.

Rethinking social interactions

You can also recognize that you are overthinking if you find yourself exhibiting shyness, introversion, and signs of social anxiety where you would be okay with interactions. Social anxiety is an excessive worry that your social skills are wanting. You start to worry that people are judging you, which causes you to become self-conscious. Often, this is also tied to a fear of social rejection. Worried that people will not like you, you work hard to win their approval when you are with them and when you leave their presence, you go through everything you said and did with a fine-toothed comb. Your focus is always on leaving a good impression, which makes social interactions exhausting.

Catastrophizing

You may be overthinking if you catch yourself catastrophizing. Catastrophizing is assuming that only the worst will happen. It involves the belief that your situation is worse than it is and often exaggerates your difficulties. For example, someone may be concerned that they will fail a test. They assume that if they fail, they are a bad student and that they will never pass, graduate, or get a job. They conclude that they will live out the rest of their days begging on the streets. They fail to realize that failing one test is not proof of any of the consequences they attach. It is important to remember that catastrophizing is not just over-exaggerating. It is often unintentional.

Living in the past

You may be overthinking if you spend a lot of time reminiscing about the past. It is okay to occasionally look back at the way things used to be. But it is not okay to live in the past. Living in the past can be anything from constantly talking about the past to constantly reaching out to an ex who has moved on. When we live in the past, we choose what is familiar. We know everything that happened and how good it was so we look back to get that feeling of comfort. The problem comes in when we don't leave it at getting some much needed comfort, but use the past to avoid the present.

Think of a mom who is constantly talking about her college days as a cheerleader or a middle-aged guy who never stops praising his days as a football player in high school. Living in the past always involves reliving some days over and over. It is common that with overthinking, you cling to negative events in the past, not just the positive ones. You start to feel that you can never be as happy or as slim or as 'whatever the ideal' as you were back then. Inevitably, living in the past breeds a fear of the future. It makes you feel sad in the present and disempowers you, stealing from your ability to work to better your future.

Anxiety

Anxiety is a feeling of dread or fear that often presents as rapid heartbeat, sweating, and a feeling of restlessness. It is often a reaction to stress. For example, you may feel anxious because you are about to do a test or just before going for a job interview. When you are feeling anxious, your thoughts become hard to control. Time does not help. Someone who is anxious is also prone to overthinking. If you are anxious about a relationship with a loved one, you may begin avoiding places where you could meet them. This causes your thoughts to start spinning and before you know it, you start overthinking. What could have been solved by a simple conversation becomes huge in your mind.

Anxiety is one of the major causes of overthinking, but overthinking also worsens anxiety. Some sources suggest that the relationship between overthinking and anxiety is a chicken and egg kind of relationship. When you are anxious, you overthink, and when you overthink, you get anxious.

Even so, since anxiety is easier to pin down, it can be a sign that you are stuck in a cycle of overthinking.

What if's

You are likely overthinking if you spend a lot of your free time thinking about the hidden meaning behind what people say or events that happen. Rather than accept them, you keep creating other scenarios and trying to resolve them. If someone says something you do not like, you start to imagine what it would have been like if you answered them a certain way instead of the way you did. You are overthinking if your mind is constantly captured by 'what ifs.'

Losing sleep

You are overthinking if you constantly find yourself lying awake at night, unable to stop your 'train of thought.' Inevitably, overthinking negatively affects your sleep, which then impacts your physical and mental health and makes you more likely to keep overthinking.



THE TAKEAWAY

So, there you have it. Overthinking is a pattern of thought where your worries create an endless loop. Rather than formulating your next steps, you become paralyzed and overwhelmed with fear. Overthinking is closely tied with anxiety, depression, and other mental health conditions. It ultimately stems from limiting beliefs within your subconscious mind that you have to learn to challenge. In the next chapter, we will talk about how to become aware of these thoughts and present strategies to deal with overthinking, some of which you can implement immediately, while others will take some time.

SEVEN POWERFUL PARADOXES TO HELP YOU STOP OVERTHINKING

Let me begin this chapter with a rather surprising example. Have you ever suffered from diarrhea? Do you remember how uncomfortable it was? In the morning, you take a water pill and some prescribed medications, stay close to the washroom and pray to God that you are not caught unawares. You have to be mindful of what you eat. If you eat the wrong thing, then in 30 minutes or so you get an uncontrollable urge to get it all out. God forbid that you have a meeting. You will dread the countless visits to the bathroom. Then there is the fact that after a while, it gets painful. Do I even need to keep describing it?

Well, overthinking is mental diarrhea. It stops you from simply sitting with your thoughts. If you could simply sit, then you would be able to focus your efforts on the things that count. But with overthinking, you expend your energy on unnecessary endless activity. The question is; when you have so much mental diarrhea, how could you possibly have energy? How could you possibly go after your goals in life? Suppose you have physical diarrhea. Do you know how weak it makes you feel?

In this chapter, I will introduce you to the seven paradoxes that if you engage with, understand, accept, and live by, will help you to deal with overthinking sustainably. I chose to use this format because overthinking itself is a paradox – you cannot think your way out of overthinking. The overthinking paradox has you setting high expectations for yourself at work, for example. When you don't achieve the results you believe you should achieve, you overthink. You get frustrated for not meeting the

expectations you have put on yourself; you try harder to control your outcomes and end up ‘forcing it,’ a consequence of your overthinking.

The overthinking paradox is always tied to the need for control. As you struggle to let go of overthinking, you end up overthinking. You try to control things that you cannot control rather than going with the flow and applying wisdom to your choices to do what feels best. You force results in relationships, at work, or with your family, forgetting that none of those are a chess game. You cannot control the outcome – you can only do your best and watch the game unfold.

The good news is, you can get out of the overthinking paradox. In 2019, NBA superstar Stephen Curry felt the pressure to perform a few hours before the tournament. By his own admission, he started to worry about himself and his fellow athletes. He had a lot of ‘shoulds’ for the game about his performance. He wanted to be able to control the results, believing that every mistake is entirely negative, with no opportunities for learning. The funny thing is that just 40 days earlier, he had been named the first unanimous MVP in the history of the NBA.

He was in the overthinking paradox. Fortunately, he had the tools to step back from it all. He realized that he could stop setting expectations about results and release his need for control. He did that and he resolved to see any potential failure as an opportunity to learn. This released his mind and gave him energy to prepare for the game. He was able to do everything he needed to improve his performance and of course, come D-Day, he did extremely well.

This athlete’s story is the story of all of us. It is the story of anyone who dares to stop the mental diarrhea. Let me ask you a question: when you have physical diarrhea, what is the first thing you do? Outside of rushing to the washroom, what is the first corrective measure you take? The first thing you do is stop eating, right? If you eat bad food and try to stop diarrhea, it will not work. In the same way, if you feed your mind with bad food, the mental diarrhea is not going to stop.

Remember, in the first chapter, we mentioned that overthinking is tied to limiting beliefs that you have learnt from people around you and from

society as you grew up. Essentially, you overthink because you have made things that you are not, your identity. The moment you identify with things that you are not, then you will overthink. It is bad food for your mind and it will run endlessly until you do something to stop it. And the thing is, every day, as long as you approach life with the wrong ideas about what is happening in your mind, you are identifying with more things that are not you and making sure that you never stop overthinking. You are in the circus.

The solution is to dis-identify with everything, understand what is yours to hold on to and release what is not you. It is to keep a little distance from it all until your mind becomes still. It is to get rid of the continuous wrong diet, which is where the seven paradoxes covered in this book come in. Each of the paradoxes address a cause and trigger of overthinking. This chapter will introduce each one of them and the chapters after this will make them practical.

The paradox of grief

Trauma (and grief) is one of the reasons we overthink. You lost a loved one, so you imagine that at any moment, you could lose someone else. Rather than getting empowered by this truth to love, it disempowers you. You wonder what is the point of loving if you will lose? So you spend your days re-hashing your grief and overthinking rather than healing and moving forward. According to the paradox of grief, experiencing suffering and loss is what makes us fully alive to love, beauty, and goodness. The more bravely we grieve, the sooner we heal.

The paradox of imperfection

Perfectionism is another common cause of overthinking. Because you want everything to go your way – the perfect way – you try your hardest to convert everything and everyone around you to your way of thinking. The struggle to be perfect launches you into the overthinking paradox, and the funny thing is, the more you strive to be perfect, the worse you appear. The paradox of imperfection holds that the more honest you are about your failures, faults, and imperfections, the more perfect you seem. Accepting it is a sure way to deal with perfection-driven overthinking.

The paradox of knowledge

This paradox solves the problem of overthinking in the pursuit of perfection, excellence, and the desire to control. In this case, you imagine that you are a bad person if you fail because instead of thinking of failure as an opportunity to learn, you think of it as something tied to your identity. Essentially, this limiting belief throws you into the overthinking mode and you imagine all of it is justified because, as you see it, you are trying to solve the problem. The only thing is, you make the problem worse. Always. According to the paradox of knowledge, the more you know, the more you realize you don't know. The more you learn, the less certain you become.

The paradox of focus

In our socially connected world, we are met with countless sources of information and opportunities that we may end up paralyzed by them. The temptation is always to think that if you focus on many things at once, you will achieve more. Overthinking often plays into this temptation in a sneaky way. It causes you to focus on all the options, overthinking so much that you end up not choosing one. You channel your energies inwards, trying to come up with all possible scenarios your options could play out. You tell yourself that the more you can anticipate, the better your performance will be. You end up not picking one option. Overthinking deceives you into making wrong investments of your time and energy - focusing on the output, rather than one opportunity. According to the paradox of focus, making more out of one opportunity makes more opportunities come your way. When you understand this paradox, rather than spending your time overthinking possibilities, you will spend your time exploring the opportunities before you, knowing that they are the path to more opportunities.

The paradox of self-love

Self-doubt and low self-esteem are inevitably tied to overthinking. When you have no faith in your abilities and when you doubt your worth, you spiral. You start striving to be who you think other people want you to be rather than being who you really are. By the paradox of self-love, the more

you can love yourself, the more you can love others and the less you will overthink.

The paradox of change

Stress and anxiety tied to change cause overthinking. Whether it is a new job position, moving to a new location, or a disagreement with your loved ones, anything that threatens to change the things you identify with causes you to stress and get anxious and overthink even more. You start acting and feigning other identities to keep things as they are. By the paradox of change, the more you try to be something you are not, the more you will stay where you are. The more you accept yourself, the more likely you are to change.

The paradox of choice

Another reason we overthink is the availability of so many options to pick from. This, coupled with perfectionism and limiting self-beliefs, paralyze you. Because of your fear of making the wrong choice, you prefer not to make a choice at all. You spend your time examining the options rather than picking one and exploring it. According to the paradox of choice, the more options you have, the more stress you will have and the less satisfaction you will experience. Understanding this paradox will help you make choices in different areas of your life so that you can reduce your options and create a simple and peaceful life.

It is worth noting that dealing with the root cause of overthinking is the way to declutter your mind, reduce stress, and embrace inner calmness. But this process will not be easy all the time. Some exercises and tools you will find in this book will be hard; they will force you to look into yourself and acknowledge parts of you you wish to keep hidden. It may mean healing your inner child. You must be courageous and bold. You must be willing to change your mental diet to give your mind better food.

As we explore the different paradoxes in-depth, you will learn to walk through life, to be actively involved in everything without identifying yourself with all of it. That way, you will have enough energy to channel to the right things and the calmness of mind to go after them without

wavering. Doing this will demand two things from you – mindfulness and self-awareness. We will explore them next because they are the foundational principles behind the seven paradoxes. Self-awareness helps you to identify which of the general causes of overthinking plagues you most. It will enable you to put a finger on the root cause of your problem, while mindfulness is what you will use to implement the tools and techniques provided later in this book.

EMBRACE MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness is a practice that uses meditative principles and cognitive therapy. It helps you find relief from stress, anxiety, and limiting beliefs, and to grow. By definition, it is the practice of being aware of your emotions, feelings, and thoughts, continuously. It is closely tied to accepting yourself as you are, without judging your thoughts. Mindfulness has many benefits, including:

1. Helping you know and understand your mood and thought patterns.
2. Helping you learn to be present and grateful for the pleasures of life.
3. Empowering you to catch yourself when you start overthinking and to stop it.
4. Empowering you to change gears from a negative state of mind to a more balanced, more aware, and more positive outlook.

Simply put, mindfulness helps you to deal with difficult moods and emotions that are tied to overthinking and rumination. For the sake of clarity, you can practice mindfulness during your daily activities. For example, you can shower mindfully, in which case, you direct your attention to everything around you – the temperature of the water, how it feels on your body, the smell of soap, the sensation of shampoo on your skin, and so forth. If your mind starts to wander, you bring it back to the present. The point of mindfulness is to bring your focus to your senses - smell, taste, hearing, sight, and feeling/touch. You can apply this to everyday activities, from brushing your teeth, eating, making your bed, to exercising. Taking the opportunity to be mindful throughout the day will help you maintain a healthy sense of awareness and to stay balanced all through the day.

Cultivate self-awareness

You cannot work on any of the causes of overthinking, or catch the triggers, if you are not self-aware. Self-awareness is the tool that enables you to become the best version of yourself. It is the ability to keep your focus on yourself and how your emotions, thoughts, and actions align - or fail to align - with your values. A highly self-aware person can objectively evaluate themselves, manage their emotions, and align their actions to their values. They accurately understand how others perceive them. This is to say that if you are self-aware, you can interpret your thoughts, actions, and feelings objectively.

Overthinking is characterized by emotion-driven interpretations of life events and circumstances. Self-awareness is the tool that helps you counter that. It also enables you to assess your growth and the effectiveness of the efforts you are making to better yourself. Self-awareness helps you know when you need to change something or leave things as they are. When we look inward as we develop self-awareness, we are able to clarify what we believe, our strengths and weaknesses, our feelings and thoughts, and we can understand our behavior. Our relationships improve and we feel happier.

Self-awareness improves our decision making, self-confidence, and communication skills. It allows us to understand situations and events from other perspectives and frees us from biases and assumptions. It, in effect, decreases stress. Throughout this book, you will find exercises designed to make you more self-aware – take the time to practice them.



THE TAKEAWAY

Overthinking is a sort of mental diarrhea that expends the energy we could spend on other things on unnecessary activity. It is paradoxical in that you cannot think yourself out of overthinking. The antidote for overthinking lies in embracing seven paradoxes of life, including:

- The paradox of grief

- The paradox of imperfection
- The paradox of knowledge
- The paradox of focus
- The paradox of self-love
- The paradox of change
- The paradox of choice

Underpinning the acceptance of these paradoxes are two psychological principles – mindfulness and self-awareness. Now let's explore these paradoxes in detail.

THE PARADOX OF GRIEF - HEAL YOUR PAST

'It is better to conquer our grief than to deceive it. For if it has withdrawn, being merely beguiled by preoccupations and pleasures, it starts up again and from its very respite, gains force to savage us.'

– **Seneca.**

Our past influences and shapes our present. It helps us know who we are and where we want to be in the future. Because of this, it is natural to use past experiences as a reference point in our current situations. The choices we make today are always influenced by our past. If we are healthy in our judgment, then past mistakes, regrets, and pain are markers for the things we do not want out of life. When we have not healed from grief, though, the past is no longer a place we occasionally visit, but a destination. For those who struggle with overthinking, letting go of the past is a necessary step to stop overthinking and have a calm mind.

Pain has a way of making you feel stuck. When you are in emotional pain, you find yourself thinking back to a time when you were happier so that you can motivate yourself to move forward. For example, if in the past you got a promotion, thinking of that past success motivates you to do better today. But referencing past positive experiences is not the problem for the overthinker. They instead focus on past negative experiences. They obsess over them, making them feel stuck.

They forget that everyone has been through something. No one goes through life unscathed. Ask around and you will find that we all have had a

past experience with a situation or a person that left a scar. For the overthinker, whenever that scar is touched, whenever they are reminded of it, the loneliness and sadness associated with it comes back no matter how much time has passed. This chapter will help you to truly move on and let go of the things that have hurt you in the past so that they will have no substantial emotional effect on you. If you heal yourself from that pain, then you are dealing with overthinking at its root.

As a rule of thumb, if you are obsessed with past memories, over a year and a half old, and if most of those memories are negative and anxiety provoking, then it means that you are stuck in the past. It means that you did not map out the past well enough, causing the part of your brain that is a sort of alarm system to warn you to fix the holes in your story and your way of looking at the world. Essentially, they are telling you that you fell once and it is unclear where that was, so you need to figure it out otherwise you will fall again.

Bear in mind that when I speak of past pain, I do not just mean death-related grief even though the loss of a loved one could be one of the causes for overthinking. I also mean any other event that happened in your life that caused significant pain. It could have been financial loss, or a breakup. You may have been fired for a mistake that was not yours. It could even go as far back as being neglected by your parents when you were little. The time when the pain happened is of no consequence here, only that the pain or trauma happened and you are yet to deal with it.

If you are unsure about it, take a moment and reflect on your memories. When you are sad, what associations do you make? When you are in conflict, how do you respond? Most of the time, traumatic pasts will show up during conflict. If you shy from conflict and have no idea why, it could be that you have an unresolved pain where your needs were not met and you learned to distrust other people's ability to meet your needs, for example. If a memory makes you feel negative and anxious, then you are stuck in the time when it happened. Your body is still reacting to it as if it is happening at the moment. As far as your brain is concerned, it could happen again, because you have not fixed whatever part you played in it.

It is like this; if you have a smoke detector in your house, what happens when it goes off? At that moment, it does not matter whose fault it is that it went off. Only that you solve the problem. The smoke detector just warns that the house may be on fire and you need to deal with it. Your anxiety around a memory is like that. It only says that there is a ‘fire in your body’ and you need to deal with it. Memories that still have the power to torture us will inevitably cause us to overthink. You will forever go into overthinking mode unless you deal with them. How do you let go of past hurts and move on? To get us started, let’s consider how the stoics dealt with grief.

HOW THE STOICS DEALT WITH GRIEF

Many people, when they experience pain, not knowing what to do with it, decide to distract themselves from it. They turn to pleasure or work or whatever other distraction they can find and throw themselves into it. Seneca was against such an approach to grief. He maintained that unhealed grief will come back to collect its dues and when it does, it will be harder to deal with. Seneca was right. Overthinking is unhealed grief coming back to collect its dues. He went on to say that if grief is conquered by reason, it calms forever. This is the paradox of grief. When you face your grief head on, when you let it rage through you unfiltered, you will process it effectively. What's more, even though it may not seem like it when you are grieving, experiencing suffering and loss makes us more grateful and aware of goodness, beauty, and love.

The stoics did not believe in remedies for grief that cheer you up or divert your attention from the grief itself. They believed that even though those things help, they only help for a short time. The better approach, said Seneca, is to end grief. The stoics advocated ending grief by accepting its inevitability. They taught that anyone who accepts pain as an integral part of life will not be surprised if they find themselves in pain. Instead, they will find ways to move past it. No, the point is not that your problem is light, or that you should ignore your emotions. Rather, you should face them and deal with grief head on. Here are four ways to deal with grief, drawn from psychology and stoic philosophy:

FOUR WAYS TO DEAL WITH TRAUMA AND GRIEF

Ride the wave - accept that something you didn't know happened

While everyone has been through tough times and has had to deal with pain at some point in their life, not everyone gets stuck in it. Some people have the tools to deal with pain without letting it consume them. They have a healthy view of pain. For the overthinker, the biggest problem is that things do not go their way. Their problem is not that their lover broke up with them or that they got fired. It is that they wanted to keep relating with their lover and keep doing their job. That is, they wanted things to work their way. The problem is, very few things in life happen the way we want them to. If you limit your life's scope to your profession, family, or education, you can easily believe that 90% of things happen your way, and 10% do not go your way. But if you expand your scope, you find that it is in fact the opposite - 10% of things go your way and 90% of things do not go your way. To deal with grief-related overthinking, you have to accept this fact.

If you are the kind of person to freak out when things do not go your way, you will break yourself because that will be 90% of the time. Whenever you find yourself obsessing over a past pain, remind yourself that you are obsessing because things didn't go your way. It is as simple as that. You are hurt because events did not play out the way you wanted them to. That is your biggest problem at that moment. Let me ask you a question; when things are not happening your way, how do you know that how they are happening is not someone else's way? What if when you are sad, someone else is happy because they have their way? If you believe in God, or the universe, what if what is happening is the universe's or God's way?

You see? It does not make sense to keep hurting yourself because of things that deviate from your plan of life. Think about it: do you reason the same way you were reasoning two years ago? Do you have the same goals? If the answer is no, then do you see how you need to be grateful that things did not happen your way? The more important thing to focus on is how

exuberant and profound your life experience is, not that it needs to go your way.

If you are having difficulty reconciling with this truth, ask yourself what you mean by your way. Isn't your way now influenced by your past? Isn't it a creation of your mind based on the past? Do you know all there is to know in the world? No. Whatever you know is still little compared to the vast knowledge that exists, so shift from expecting your way to expecting something new. Be glad that something you do not know happened – something you did not expect played out and that's an opportunity to learn. Ride the waves of life and learn the lessons it has to offer.

Go back to the past and clean it up - reflect

As I mentioned earlier, if a memory is causing you anxiety, that is your body communicating that there is something you are yet to deal with. One way to deal with it is to go back to that memory and clean things up. The idea is to figure out how the painful event happened. What role did you play in letting it happen? Your role does not have to have been major. Sometimes things happen to us and we are truly victims. But that is hardly the point here. The point is, what did you do that led you down that path? If you identify it, you make sure that you will not be in the same vulnerable position again.

The point of this exercise is to strengthen yourself. It is to teach your brain that you have what it takes to deal with the problem should it come up again. For an old memory, say of an event that happened five years ago, what your brain does not realize is that you have grown. You are no longer the person you were five years ago. You likely have a variety of techniques at hand now to handle the problem if it came up today. For example, if the memory that causes you emotional pain is one of unjustified termination, going back to that time may show you that you did not speak up. It will help you realize that you now know how to communicate, and have the backbone to stand up for yourself instead of taking the blame for something you are not responsible for.

In going back to the memory, you update the part of your brain that still imagines you are in the same kind of danger that you were in when the

traumatic event happened. The same is true for childhood trauma. If your childhood was horrible, and if you still get anxious remembering it, facing it and figuring out what you might do differently can help you stop trauma-related overthinking. In going back to that terrible memory, you realize that you are no longer that child. Your brain starts to recognize that you now have years of experience that would help you fight back against the things that made your childhood horrible.

When you go back to your past to unpack it and clean it up, remind yourself that the past is a done-deal. You cannot change it. Being stuck there only hurts your present potential. Work at accepting that the past is over. Acceptance will allow you to grieve and to release the pain that you are carrying with you. You can do this alone or with the help of a friend. Be honest with yourself or it will all be in vain. Ask yourself the following questions – what about that situation hurt me? What could I have done better? What do I know now that would help me deal better if I was in the same situation?

Journal to map out where you are

Journaling can also be a powerful tool to help you unpack past hurts and let them go. Within the pages of a journal, you can find a patient and understanding friend. You can explore everything within your psyche and find things you have been hiding from yourself. But in this case, you do not journal randomly. Here, the goal is to know exactly where you are – not physically, but psychologically and mentally. The purpose is to find out the tools you have in your arsenal, the pains you are still carrying, and to some extent, the place you hope to be. When you are overthinking because of trauma, you lose your sense of direction. It leaves you feeling hopeless and in despair. Journaling to map out where you are will start to clear your vision.

Imagine you are on one side of the road. You decide that you will cross the road so that you can visit a candy shop on the other side. Making that decision excites you and narrows your focus. You have set your eyes on a place that is better than where you are (the candy shop) and because of that, you feel better. That is what journaling to release trauma does for you. Your

positive emotion system runs on dopamine and your brain releases dopamine when you have a goal. When you feel better, then you are less likely to overthink. Aim to journal every day for the next three weeks to release any pain you are still holding onto. Here are 21 daily prompts to help you as you process, reflect, and learn from your past trauma. Work through them until you feel ready to thank yourself for everything you have been through and the things that caused you pain.

- What old emotions do I still experience that I want to release?
- Where did these emotions originate?
- What did I feel the first time I noticed these emotions?
- How do I feel now whenever these emotions resurface?
- Are there obvious lessons from this experience?
- How was I conducting myself in this relationship?
- Can I see the ways I stopped my own growth?
- When I was going through this traumatic experience, did I know I was experiencing trauma? If not, when did I know?
- Do I consider myself a victim?
- Why do I think of myself as a victim?
- Am I angry and resentful towards the experience or person who caused me trauma? Why?
- Is my anger and resentment serving me? Will I carry it all my life?
- When is the right time to let go of my anger and resentment?
- What have I learnt about life this year?
- Why am I carrying these lessons but releasing the negative emotions?
- How do I move forward? What is holding me back?
- What daily thing can I change that will affect the way I feel?
- What triggers the emotions that I experience?
- How will I deal with triggers in the future?
- Am I ready to find my identity outside of this traumatic place, event, or person? If yes, how?
- Can I see how this traumatic event has caused me to grow? Am I a better person because of it?

As you journal, do not force yourself to give the answers you think you are supposed to give. Simply choose honesty. When you can look back at that terrible time, see how much better you are now, and feel gratitude, then you have healed that part of you. Write a thank-you statement to the things and people that caused you pain. No, you will not deliver these letters, but they will serve as a reminder that you have moved to a higher self. You are better today, because they weren't.

Embrace silence and give it time

Most problems aren't solved with more thinking, but with less. You'll find most of the answers you are looking for in silence - in the still and clear mind. If you can't solve the problem, as is the case with grief, stop trying to. When you are tempted to overthink, have the courage to feel exactly what you are feeling. Acknowledge the trigger and then exist in that moment without trying to change it – no pressure, no performance. Just be.

GET EMPOWERED

It is not enough to deal with grief and trauma. You also need to empower yourself so that you can move forward with grace and inner quietness. You can do this by creating a positive mantra to affirm yourself. Remember when we talked about self-awareness in chapter two? This is one of the places it comes in. Once you have faced your trauma head on and have released most of the negative energy, you still need to remind yourself of this fact. To do this, you need to be self-aware so that you can recognize it when you are on the cusp of spiraling.

You see, you have lived for weeks or years doing things a certain way. Changing will take some time. Affirmations will help you solidify that change. They will help you to move forward rather than staying stuck. When that familiar and old pain comes up, rather than allowing your brain to do its default, – overthink – you stop it by repeating your chosen mantra to yourself. A mantra is a statement that helps you reframe your thoughts. For example, rather than getting stuck thinking ‘I can’t believe I went through this,’ you use a positive mantra like, ‘I am lucky that this set me down a good path in life.’

You can use mantras/affirmations designed for people in your situation, like the few I will provide at the end of this section, or you can personalize one. Since the idea of writing your own affirmation is intimidating for many people especially in periods when they really need them, here are steps you can use to create your own:

1. Write it down – What negative feeling has come up that is related to a pain in your past? Write it. You can also refer to your journal on this one.
2. Cross it out – Draw a line through that one emotion to indicate to your brain that it is an untruth.
3. Change it up – Rewrite the feeling as a positive truth. You now have an affirmation.

You can repeat this process as many times as you need to to come up with as many affirmations as you need. Post those affirmations in places that you frequent during the day. It can be on your fridge door or on your work desk. You can even have it on a mug, as long as it is in a place that reminds you to love and affirm yourself. That said, here are some affirmations that you can tweak and personalize or use as they are:

- I choose to release my perceived pain.
- I am letting go of the desire to be right.
- I am not a victim. I take responsibility for my relationships.
- I trust that everything in my life happened the way it is supposed to.
- I bless the past and live in the present with an open heart.



THE TAKEAWAY

Grief and trauma often cause overthinking. They can keep you stuck in a loop of thoughts that you can only get out of if you:

- Face your pain head on
- Ride the wave
- Journal to map out exactly where you are
- Affirm yourself when negative emotions and thoughts come up
- Embrace time and silence.

THE PARADOX OF IMPERFECTION - OVERCOME PERFECTIONISM

The idea of perfectionism is one we encounter almost every day. How often do you hear someone say ‘I just have very high standards,’ with a hint of pride? Or how often do you interact with people who will not delegate because, as they say, ‘I like to do my things well?’ However, perfectionism has a dark side. It is not simply about doing things well, it is about the way we respond when things deviate from our expectations, or our perceptions of what those people expect for us.

Overthinking and perfectionism are very closely tied. Many people never start new ventures because of overthinking and perfectionism. It could be anything from starting a diet, a business, or even making a new purchase. They fear failing so much that they cannot take the necessary step forward. When that fear kicks in, they enter planning mode where they overthink ‘the plan’ for days. Days become months and months slowly turn into years. Before they know it, it has been a decade and they are still trying to figure out the perfect plan.

Whenever perfectionism drives overthinking, you use the excuse of ‘taking your time to think’ as a reason not to start while the real reason is that you are just scared. The paradox of it is, the more honest you are about your faults, failures, and imperfections, the more perfect you seem, and the closer you get to excellence. Let me tell you a story. Laura is a designer and developer at a well-known tech company. Recently, she was asked to write a blog post on the company’s site to explain her experience as one of the top

people in her industry. She was excited by the idea, but very nervous. She has always had perfectionist tendencies.

Laura thought about the task and decided on the topic she wanted to handle. She knew where she could find the supporting research. She would use research and couple it with her experience to highlight how different it is to be a woman in design and development. She was ready to get started. The only problem is, she didn't. She told herself that she needed her article to be perfect and so she would consult with other people who had written something similar. Then she imagined that if she reached out, they would think she was unqualified to write the piece. Before she knew it, she was overthinking. Her perfectionistic tendencies had driven her into a thought-loop and that thought loop was keeping her from accomplishing what she'd set out to do.

After a couple of days, she decided to do something. She encouraged herself to 'stop overthinking it' and powered up her laptop. She stared at it for a couple of minutes before realizing that no amount of 'get on with it' was going to work. These words followed her like an unwanted echo, making her situation even harder, so much so that when she eventually started, she got caught up in the nitty-gritty. She agonized over her ideas. She tweaked her sentences and then when she was done, she deleted and reworked the article. Fortunately for her, her boss was gracious and gave her more time within which she was able to finish and submit the blog post. But things could have gone awfully wrong for Laura.

WHAT PSYCHOLOGY SAYS ABOUT OVERTHINKING AND PERFECTIONISM

By definition, perfectionism is the need to appear or to be perfect or the belief that you can possibly achieve perfection. It differs from striving to do your best. It is not about healthy growth or achievement. According to Brené Brown, a research professor and author at Houston University, perfectionism is a shield against the blame of shame or judgment. It is a trait that can make your life like an endless report card and can fast track you to enduring unhappiness. What makes it so toxic is that while you desire success, your focus is not achieving it, but avoiding failure, which means that you are negatively oriented. Rather than believing in unconditional love and expecting approval and affection from others, you focus on avoiding disapproval and not making a mistake.

Research says that perfectionism is driven by internal pressures even though there is a social component to it. Professional and academic competition have been found to play a huge role in escalating perfectionistic tendencies, together with harmful social comparisons online. The hallmark of perfectionism is unrealistically high expectations for others and for yourself. You become quick to find fault and are very critical of mistakes. You procrastinate projects because you are afraid of failing and ignore compliments because you cannot celebrate your success. Instead, you look at some people in your life for validation and approval.

Research shows that overthinking is very common among perfectionists and is often tied to anxiety, ruminating, and obsessive thinking. People who overthink feel like they cannot get their brains to quiet down. They constantly question, evaluate, and second guess themselves so much that they can hardly make decisions. They spend too much time trying to decide and then second guess those decisions. Sometimes this causes them to defer their choices to other people. In meetings, for example, someone who is overthinking might be asked a question. In response, they claim ignorance, because it is the easier way out.

When this overthinking is driven by perfectionism, it is even worse. In the same meeting, they would be concerned about answering the question with the most accurate answer and as compellingly as possible. If they end up speaking, they later replay their words and criticize their mistakes, feeling inadequate. Where overthinking is about understanding all the possible results and causes, perfectionism is feeling that nearly everything to do within a situation will not be enough.

Overthinking and perfectionism fuel each other. If you are overthinking, you become handicapped by the need to be perfect. When you are overcome by the need to be perfect, you overthink. Imagine your boss sends you an email asking you to confirm your availability for a meeting. As you read through the email, you remember that you had a prior engagement. You want to communicate that but you want your words to be perfect. You start typing your response but nothing seems to cut it. You end up spending over 30 minutes trying to perfect a two-sentence email. Not only is the experience frustrating, you also feel like there is nothing you can do to help it. You are stuck.

It is important to note here that you can have self-oriented perfectionistic tendencies where you set unrealistic expectations for yourself, or you can impose those on others. Either way, perfectionism is dangerous. Not only does it cause procrastination, it also leads to rigid thinking, a lack of creativity, and toxic comparisons. It sets the stage for anxiety, depression and even, in some cases, suicidal impulses. Simply put, perfectionism has a negative impact on your mental health and ultimately, your physical health. When you cannot calm your mind, you have poor sleep quality which causes your stress levels to rise. High stress levels could cause you to seek relief in harmful practices like alcohol consumption or overeating.

Professionals disagree on the relationship between perfectionism and overthinking, but overwhelmingly agree that the two go together, and that they inevitably stand in the way of success. They condition you to think that the only way to measure your value is success. They leave no room for failure. They create a cycle of avoidance, anxiety, and self-doubt. Since the ideal you long for is unattainable, it causes shame and guilt and distorts your self-worth. It supports the myth that you have to jump through

countless hoops to feel good about who you are. Instead of doing things for your enjoyment, you do them for validation.

The final thing to note about perfectionism is that it motivates you using fear. When you are completely invested in the results, fear and anticipation are the driving forces. You become agitated and nervous and get consumed by thoughts of what could happen if things backfire. Yet, even anecdotal evidence shows that when fear is the steady hand on your back, you will always focus on mistakes and never enjoy what is happening around you. The result, of course, is burnout.

FIVE WAYS TO OVERCOME PERFECTIONISM

Get friendly with your tendencies

You cannot overcome perfectionism and perfectionism-induced overthinking if you are not self-aware enough to catch yourself when you are sliding into perfectionism. The first step to overcoming it is becoming aware of your tendencies to pursue the impossible. Take some time with yourself and evaluate your thought patterns. Do you fail to act because of perfectionism and overthinking? Do you disguise your perfectionistic tendencies as pursuit for excellence? You can even use a journal to help you introspect. The idea is to find areas where perfectionism is holding you back.

The thing to remember here is that sometimes people have perfectionistic tendencies around work, but are more relaxed and at ease in their relationships. That is to say, as you look at yourself, know that perfectionism can affect some areas more than others, or can show up only in some areas of life. Go through your life with a fine-toothed comb for a week, every evening, filtering out perfectionistic tendencies and then look at the data analytically. When did you feel like you failed or were inadequate? Were you really inadequate or were your expectations too high?

Let go of the comparison mindset

Letting go of the need to compare yourself with others can help you achieve great things without being beholden to an impossible ideal of perfectionism. You can let go of the comparison mindset by embracing and practicing mindfulness and staying present in the moment. When I was younger, I used to tutor in a school to make some extra money. Back then, I would compare my performance to that of my colleagues. I even graded myself – a solid B. I had many colleagues who rated below that, but I did not think about them. All I thought about were the teachers I believed were better than me. I judged myself negatively for not being like them and that caused me so much suffering I considered leaving before my time was due.

One day, I shared my woes with a friend who was not involved in the school. Without batting an eye, she told me, ‘There can only be one Albert Einstein. That should not stop us from being scientists.’ That comment was timely. It made such a difference in my life because I realized that I did not have to compare myself with others. I realized I was a perfectionist. I could not do something and feel happy if it was not rated the best and that was the biggest source of my suffering.

Many of us are conditioned to hold ourselves to an impossible standard. We live in a stressed state of mind governed by the unyielding belief that we are nothing if we are not the best. This belief may have been introduced to us by our guardians, the media, or other influences in our lives. It causes us to always compare ourselves to others and we always come short, as far as we are concerned. Sometimes we do not even realize that the people we compare ourselves to are also coming short in their own comparisons.

I am not saying that we are incapable of learning from other people, but that we do not need to keep pursuing perfection. We can feel okay about the quality of our work and our relationships. And as a bonus, according to the paradox of imperfection, when we do accept our faults and imperfections, we improve. All you need to do is your best. All you need to do is let go of the need to be perfect. Ask yourself this question – who decides if anything is good enough? When you are in a perfectionism-induced thought loop, it is never you. It is always everyone else – your teachers, parents, siblings, romantic partners, coworkers, and so forth.

Echoing the Buddha, modern neuroscientists say that our habits are not written in stone. The mind is pliant, which means that you can unlearn your comparison mindset. You can change how you think and act, which will rewire your brain. Through mindfulness, you can rewire your brain and make it an ally rather than an enemy. When you catch yourself overthinking and indulging your perfectionistic tendencies, perform the following mindfulness exercise:

1. Take a break from what you are doing.
2. Stop stressing and comparing yourself by coming to the present moment. Look around you and notice little things. Then shift your

- attention to your body. How do you feel? What is going on in your mind? How does it make you feel in your gut?
3. Take conscious breaths and focus on them. What does the air smell like? How does it feel in your lungs and nose when inhaling and exhaling? Do this for a few minutes until you feel grounded and present.
 4. Proceed with what you were doing.

The exercise should take less than five minutes. It will recenter you and allow you to let go of the need to compare yourself with others.

Make your self-talk compassionate

The line between success and failure can be down to how you talk to yourself. Self-talk is the consistent stream of dialog in your mind. It can either be positive or negative. For perfectionists, it tends to be negative. Self-talk is so important that it can change your mindset and affect your actions. In turn, that influences how you deal with obstacles. In 2013, scientists did a study on anorexic women entering their labs. The surprising thing they found was that each of those women turned sideways when entering through the door as if they were so overweight that they could not fit. Imagine that! It is because how we view ourselves and talk to ourselves shapes even the way we behave.

Imagine if a friend came to you crying because they did not pass a test as well as they hoped. Maybe, rather than emerging the best, your friend was second and she is upset about it. What would your response be? Most likely, you would first empathize. Then, when she has sufficiently calmed down, you would show her how second place is still a win. Now imagine if you were the friend. What would you tell yourself? We tend to find it easier to be compassionate toward others than ourselves, but learning to be compassionate with yourself is choosing to also be your own friend.

A little compassion in your self-talk can go a long way in helping you stop evaluating yourself using an impossible standard. The thought underlying perfectionism is always 'I am not good enough if I am not perfect,' or other versions of the same including 'my effort is my worth.' You can challenge

this narrative. When it starts to creep up, you can remind yourself to be grateful instead because perfect existence cannot exist in an imperfect world. If you are struggling because you failed, do not beat yourself up. Instead, nurture the ability to bounce back in the face of adversity. If you have to criticize yourself, make that criticism constructive and actionable. Otherwise, it is not necessary.

It is easy to become oblivious of the messages you keep sending yourself. To create new and positive self-talk, pay attention to your thoughts. When you notice yourself assigning negative labels to yourself, call each label to question. What does the evidence suggest? Is your thought accurate? Discard every thought that is not 100% accurate and replace it with something realistic. For example, 'I will never be promoted' can become 'If I work hard and keep improving myself, I may get a promotion someday.'

Make your goals reasonable

If your goals are unclarified, then perfectionism and overthinking will kick in. Your goals will become unrealistic, driven by the desire to be perfect and you will again get stuck in the pursuit for the impossible. When you are beginning a new project, set goals and make them SMART – specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time-bound. You will feel more confident in your ability to achieve them if they challenge you in a healthy way. Remember that your goals must always align with what you know.

Sometimes, the best goals can fall by the wayside if you fail to check in. You are always growing, your situation in life changes and so do your resources - so much so that one sensible goal today, easily becomes unrealistic the next day. Make a habit of re-evaluating your goals so that you can align them with your present self. Ask yourself questions like - why did I set this goal for myself? Do I still want the same thing? If so, why and if not, why not? It is perfectly okay if your goal has changed. Take some time to reflect on what is new and what the new goal is.

Detach yourself from the opinion of others

Attachment to people's opinions is a major driver for perfectionistic tendencies. In that state, you are so deeply attached to someone else's

opinion of you that it harms you when they disapprove of you. Because you do not want to deal with the discomfort of their disapproval, you are always working hard, bending over backwards to achieve your perception of their ideals or expectations of you. To deal with perfectionism driven by an attachment to other people's opinions, you have to learn to detach yourself.

Detaching yourself is not about ceasing to care. It is about giving priority to how you care. It is about separating yourself from what is toxic and choosing what is important to you. It is all about taking responsibility for your happiness and caring about the right things. To begin detaching from other people's opinions of you, remind yourself that attachment is not the same as love. Someone can love you and disapprove of one thing you are doing. True, it feels like love to be controlled by your strong connection to others, but you have to train yourself to make the distinction because it will change how you view the situation.

Secondly, figure out why you feel so devoted to other people. Sometimes, you are a slave to one person's opinion of you – say a parent. Other times, perfectionism comes from seeing the approval of strangers. Whatever the case, get curious and find out what it is about others that makes you want to change who you are. How long have you had these feelings? Is there something about your self-worth that always comes into play? Asking these questions will help you to understand yourself better.

Finally, practice emotional regulation. Emotional regulation is the ability to control your emotional state. It involves rethinking the situation you are in and reframing it to reduce the negative emotions associated with it and then focusing on the reasons to feel calm or happy. It will make your emotions feel less burdensome and help you create boundaries in your relationships. Ask yourself these three questions about every situation that makes you feel dysregulated. Is it really worth getting upset over? Does it deserve my energy? Is it worth giving up my happiness for?

GET EMPOWERED

As you recover from perfectionism, you will realize that your focus is changing. You are becoming less and less about the outcome and more about the process. When that starts to happen, be sure to enjoy the process. Get involved with groups working to achieve the same goal as you or take up journaling your process. The idea is to make the progress fun. You can also solidify your growth and take the sting from your mistakes by focusing on progress over perfection.

A story is told of one chess player who, after every match, analyzes all the moves he made. During this process, he dissects his errors so that he can do better the next time. Overthinking dissects all your moves, but without helping you do better. The idea in this case is to counteract overthinking by setting aside time, say fifteen minutes, to think analytically about your mistakes. When you are tempted to think about them another time of the day, remind yourself that there will be time for it. When that time comes, revisit your errors with intent. Gather all the lessons you can and figure out how they apply to different areas in your life. Then, let it go and focus on the positives.

Your brain naturally picks up mistakes because of perfectionism, so you will need to be intentional about finding the positives. If your brain comes up with something you don't like about yourself, for example, find three things you like about yourself. The idea is to balance out your critical focus and form a new positive habit.



THE TAKEAWAY

Removing your mind from the crutches of overthinking is not a one-night affair. You will need to deal with the perfectionism that drives it. You will have to attack the belief that you have no value unless you are perfect by:

- Identifying and acknowledging your perfectionist tendencies
- Changing your comparison mindset through mindfulness
- Making your self-talk compassionate
- Making your goals reasonable
- Detaching yourself from the opinion of others.

THE PARADOX OF KNOWLEDGE - TAKE ACTION

Most people will take some time to think about their options when making a choice. That's normal. What is not normal is when you weigh your options and your scales do not balance, so you spend more time thinking until you never make the choice. This type of overthinking is commonly called analysis paralysis. A person with analysis paralysis will spend a lot of their time researching and acquiring more knowledge, telling themselves that they want to make the best choice. They do this for both small and large decisions. With small choices like which coffee shop to visit, they might end up not going at all. With large decisions like accepting a job offer, they may worry that they will make a mistake until they miss their deadline and the decision is made for them.

Analysis paralysis is a thought loop that creates possibilities and scenarios that overwhelm you so much you end up not making a choice. Of course, it is distressing and difficult to overcome because overcoming it requires making a conscious decision to work at it. In this chapter, we will discuss what analysis paralysis looks like and how embracing the paradox of knowledge can help you to finally make the choices you need to make.

It is like this – thinking in itself introduces an element of strain to our minds. It calls upon your body to rally the resources to help you keep up with what you are seeing or what you hear. In a sense, thought is slower than sense-based responses because it has to be ordered. Besides that, thought is abstract, and the more you tend to live in your mind, the more you are living in an abstract world that is detached from reality. The more

you overthink, the larger the gap between where you are living and the world. Because of this, your world feels integrally unsatisfying and dull.

In oriental cultures in China, Japan, and India, it is considered important that everyone spends some time not thinking at all. This is not because all thinking is bad, but because thinking has no real value if you cannot quiet your mind and act – unless your mind can be silent enough to allow you to make real and immediate contact with the world outside as separate from the abstract world of your thoughts. Daoists advocate for meditation as a way to lose contact for a while with the world of thought and interact with what actually is.

When you effectively deal with analysis paralysis, you start to notice a change in your general experience of life. The interval between yourself and your experiences ceases to exist. You see, for the typical overthinker, that chronic strain attached to their thoughts is always present. There is always an ongoing attempt to think about and iron out whatever they are feeling. Their ego is ever so loud that it blocks their experience and alienates them from the external world. As you work on yourself to take more action, you will notice that the detachment from the moment diminishes and you start experiencing the world as yourself. Life begins to feel engaging. Every moment is charged with meaning. You feel completely absorbed the way you are when listening to music – you are fully one with it. You just go with it. Your mind instantly responds to the information from your senses as if the mind and your experiences are the same. Some people call that inner peace.

HOW KNOWLEDGE RELATES TO ANALYSIS PARALYSIS

Analysis paralysis tends to affect people who see many options or solutions to their problems. Often, they are receiving equally beneficial information about their options (knowledge), making it impossible to choose. Sometimes they are setting their research parameters too broadly or their limits are vague. Whatever the case, they are unable to choose because they know so much. They pursue more knowledge hoping that it will help them get out of their dilemma, only to make things worse.

When all your options seem equally helpful, it is a challenge to decide which one is best. For example, if shifting your way of doing business one way will increase your profits but another option will increase your customer outreach, it may be hard to determine which way to go. The healthy thinker in this situation will specify their research parameters and make their choice. The overthinker will go full mode into researching both customer outreach and profits until they never try either approach.

There is an age-old debate in the world of science about what happens as science develops and we know more than ever before in human history. Some people think that that knowledge diminishes people's experience of awe. Romantic poets of the past suggested that knowledge gets in the way of wonder. However, the truth is that regardless of how far you go and how many steps you take towards understanding something, you will never know everything there is to know. As your knowledge extends, so does your awareness of how much more there is to learn. This is the paradox of knowledge – the more you know, the less certain you become.

I was recently reading about chlorophyll, the pigment that gives plants their green color. It was surprising to learn that scientists still do not know how it turns sunlight into energy. Apparently, the process involves all kinds of quantum phenomena in the leaf. The scientific paper went on to state that as researchers zone in on the mechanics of this phenomena, they enter a zone of uncertainty where they can't get any further. This is also true in other fields like in medicine. Medical practitioners are so far from understanding

how the immune system works and how the brain works that no matter how much research is carried out, more questions crop up. For example, how does one explain how or why the human immune system sometimes chooses to attack a part of itself?

Think of it like this: if you think of what you know about the world (knowledge) as an island, the island grows whenever you learn something new. The paradox of knowledge is that as the island grows, you become more capable of asking more complex questions that you did not have the capacity to contemplate before. New knowledge births new questions. This is a wonderful thing if you learn to harness it, but a damning thing if you keep getting stuck in the loop of overthinking.

If you accept the paradox of knowledge, you realize that there is no end to the pursuit of knowledge. You embrace the fact that mystery will always be tied to knowledge and so you know when to stop and when to keep asking questions. The overthinker finds it depressing that there is always mystery attached to knowledge because they are yet to learn how to discipline their mind to stop thinking, leave their world of abstraction, and take action. They are yet to come to terms with the fact that they can never know everything, and that they can make a wise choice with what they know. They are yet to enjoy the reward of the searching process because their obsession is always finding the final answer.

It does not help that today's world is more connected than ever before and information is available and easily accessible. Let me ask you a question; have you ever been required to make a choice? Of course, you have! But can you make on-the-spot decisions, for example, or are you always paralyzed by indecision? Do you start going through possible outcomes until you disempower yourself? What would you do in the following situations?

The team work dilemma

Imagine you are the leader of a team. You all need to make a decision, but everyone has differing opinions. Half of the team wants option A and the other wants option B. What do you do? The overthinker will choose to research further or relegate the decision to someone else.

The shopping dilemma

You need to buy a car or a house or any other expensive item. What is your process like? Do you get stuck and paralyzed because of how many options you have?

When we are thinking, we come up with ideas to solve our current problem. When we are overthinking, we just run scenarios and situations in our heads until it is difficult to take any action. When analysis paralysis becomes tied into your life, you become habitually apprehensive of trying new things. You never listen to your gut. In fact, many overthinkers do not know what it is like to make choices based on instinct. To avoid the pitfalls of analysis paralysis, here are four considerations to remember when you're hit by so many bright balls of information:

FOUR WAYS TO DEAL WITH ANALYSIS PARALYSIS

Recognize and prioritize

If you can recognize when you are paralyzed by indecision, then you can take steps to fix it at the right time. One way to recognize when you are stepping into this trap is to look at your decision-making processes for different decisions. What was the last choice you made where you had options? What steps did you take and how long did it take you to make the decision? If the decision you need to make at the moment is taking long and the processes you used before are not working, then you are overthinking.

After you recognize what is happening, ask yourself why you are overthinking. Refer to chapter one if you need a refresher on the general reasons people overthink. If you have a better idea of why you cannot solve your current problem, then it may be easier to shift your focus. For example, you may find that you are overthinking because you think the outcome of the decision will affect you negatively. In such a case, then you focus on positive outcomes. If you are overthinking because of anxiety, then you can address that anxiety to ease your decision making process. Look inward. What is making you overthink? Is it anxiety?

If you find that you are overthinking because of anxiety, engage in physical activity. It does not need to be a full-blown one hour workout session. The physical activity can be anything from taking a five minute walk to doing 20 jumping jacks - anything to get your heart beating and your brain to release endorphins. Physical activity is a stress reducer and mood stabilizer. The feel-good hormones it produces enhance your sense of well-being, reducing anxiety. It is also a good idea to include regular exercise into your lifestyle.

As a rule of thumb, prioritize your decisions. When your brain has to keep weighing options and making choices, it gets overworked and you feel tired. Prioritization is a two step process that demands that you understand your decisions and then schedule them. I must mention here that some decisions are simpler than others. To identify and understand your

decisions, take stock of your days. What do you do when you wake up? What things are routine? Take note of every choice you need to make from the choice of what to wear to work and what to eat, to big choices like who to hire. Granted that not each day is the same as the previous, some decisions recur.

Once you have a good idea of the recurring decisions, find a way to automate them, for example. Organize your life such that you do not spend a lot of time making the simple decisions. For example, you can plan your outfits for the week on Monday so that you do not need to make that decision every day. Pay attention to your work patterns so that you make the important decisions only when you are fresh. Avoid making major decisions when tired, angry or hungry.

Set a deadline

To relieve your mind of analysis paralysis, make your choices quickly. Here, I am talking about every decision that you have to make during the day, whether it is what you will eat or what you will wear. Making your decisions quickly will help you feel confident so that when you are presented with a big decision, you will have given your brain evidence of your ability to choose well, making it easier not to overthink. Setting a deadline for your solutions or projects will help you avoid overthinking. It will motivate you to get on with it fast. Ensure that your deadlines are realistic, otherwise they will trigger anxiety.

Limit your intake of information around your goals

As I have demonstrated, too much information can cause you to overthink. When you are having trouble deciding, limit how much research you do for each choice. Know if your options come with risks, but only have the basic knowledge necessary. Always curb your intellectual curiosity. Set goals for what you need to know in the present and what you need to know in the future. If what you know now is enough for you to make the choice, then it is time to move forward. If it is a bit difficult, remind yourself why the choice matters in the first place. Getting in touch with your goals can help you to narrow your options and make the right choice.

Flip a coin or use the 40-70 rule

Regardless of how much information you have gathered, there will always be more. Because of this, decisions can never be optimal. What you can optimize is the time you make the decisions. Besides, just because you make one choice does not mean that you can never change your mind and change course. In the military, when under mortar attack, it does not matter the direction soldiers move, only that they move. Most decisions in life are never final because change is inevitable. Rather than being rigid about your choice, choose to adapt and improve on the fly.

Knowing that you can adapt, if you have to choose between two similarly good options, flip a coin. This may sound simplistic, but if a coin cannot help you, then your intuition knows that one choice is better, or the choice is not that important. Flipping a coin can help you avoid wasting time. Alternatively, you can use the 40-70 rule. Whenever you need to make a choice, you need a minimum of 40% and maximum of 70% of the information you need to make that choice. If it's less than 40%, your decision is careless. If it is more than 70%, the opportunity has passed. You have been beaten to the punch.

GET EMPOWERED

I have talked a lot about your gut feeling or instinct. In this section, you will learn how to listen to and make choices by your gut feeling. Instinct is a sort of knowing. It is a gentle and often inexplicable persuasion that something needs your attention or something is good. It does not shout for your attention, which is why many overthinkers miss it. It speaks in a quiet voice that requires you to be quiet enough to hear. Researchers at the University of Leeds went through many papers on intuition and concluded that it is a psychological process where your brain uses your past experiences and clues from the environment to help you make a choice. The choice happens so fast that it does not appear consciously made.

We all have intuition, but some people have sharpened it more than others. The brain has two systems. The first one is effortless and instinctual. Intuition is found here. It draws on experiential patterns to make fast choices on whether something is right, wrong, good, bad, real, or fake. It happens outside your conscious awareness. The second system responds slower. It is conscious, analytical, and deliberate. Overthinkers mostly live here.

One study by Bechara et al. showed that our brain's intuitive part always knows the right answers before the analytical part (1997). In the study, participants were asked to play a card game that was rigged from the start, but they did not know it was rigged - only that they would be playing. They had to pick from one of two card decks. One deck would provide big wins and then big losses. The other was offering small gains with few losses if any. After 50 cards, participants had a hunch about the safer deck. After 80, they could explain what was different about the decks. The interesting part is after only 10 cards, their hands would sweat whenever they picked from the dangerous deck. That was when they started choosing cards from the safe deck, but they were not aware this was happening. Before the analytical part of their brain understood what was happening, their intuition already led them to the better choice.

Sharpening your intuition will help you overcome analysis paralysis in the long run. To do this, listen. It sounds simple, and it is, if you will allow yourself to be simple enough to try it. Your intuition will not talk if it will not be heard, so just listen and when you hear that quiet voice, trust it. You will know that your intuition is speaking because you will be able to feel it. You will feel it as goosebumps pebbling your skin, a shiver down your spine, quickening breaths, a racing heart, or you will just feel it in your belly. Sometimes you will ‘just know.’ Remember that when it is your intuition speaking, your next move will be enriching, nourishing, and clear.

Learning to follow your intuition has a lot to do with trusting nature and trusting yourself. If you are in the habit of judging yourself, then you will find it harder to follow it. For the sake of clarity, your intuition is speaking if:

- You have a tight feeling in your stomach or chest - The sinking feeling is your intuition being so strong that your body physically picks up on it.
- You are happy and confident with your choice even if it seems irrational - When your intuition speaks, you experience clarity and confidence. Fear and uncertainty stem from the ego.
- You are hyper aware - Sometimes you notice things you would otherwise miss because your intuition is trying to protect you.
- You keep getting the same opportunities - Your intuition may be talking to you by trying to draw your attention to patterns in your life.
- You feel uneasy about a situation - Ignoring your intuition will make you feel uneasy. Pay attention to what your body is saying.



THE TAKEAWAY

There is nothing wrong about considering your options when you are making a choice, but if you find yourself constantly indecisive because you

are always pursuing knowledge, then it is time to do something about it. In those instances, make your choice by:

- Recognizing that you are stuck and prioritize your choices
- Setting a deadline for your decisions
- Limiting your information intake around your goals
- Flipping a coin or using the 40-70 rule.

Be sure to work on sharpening your intuition so that it can guide you more effortlessly on the path that you should take. Remember that no choice is written in stone. You can always adapt to change or change course if things are not working as expected.

THE PARADOX OF FOCUS - NARROW YOUR VIEW

If you are like me, you have ever picked up a book and just when you were getting into it, you heard your phone vibrate. You have probably responded to email notifications or seen text messages popping up on your lock screen that were difficult to resist. Once you start going through those apps, you figure you may as well check what's happening on Twitter. Before you know it, you've done little reading in the time you set aside.

In the book 'What the Internet is Doing to our Brains,' Nicholas Carr argues that the internet is hijacking our brains and stealing our ability to concentrate. I may not go that far, but I argue that in today's world, the web is very seductive and one has to be very careful about how they deal with it. In the age of powerful processors and big data, we absorb more data, faster, and risk getting so stuck in distractions that we lose grip of what matters in life.

A question many people ask is; How do I focus in the face of all these distractions? In today's hyper-connectedness, how do I connect to what matters? This question is one everyone must answer, but more so the overthinker. In one sense, the overthinking brain is a brain focused on the wrong things. The overthinker always imagines that they need to figure out everything they need to do before they can attempt it. If they have three projects, for example, they might spend their day thinking about them and how to do each of them well, so much so that they never make any progress towards completing the projects.

Imagine this: during the work meeting, you were asked to lead a project. You hesitated because you were overthinking so your boss picked someone else. But you really wanted that project except that you messed up. You always mess up, you tell yourself! Then you catch yourself listing other scenarios when you messed up so you decide that you will be better from now on. You will be confident. You will focus on doing better. Motivated by your epiphany, you sign up to a gym – you will start working out. You send that email you have been postponing – you will finally go back to school. You call your friend to plan a meetup. This year, you will not only be in your best shape, you will be a student again as you build your career and you will be the best friend any best friend has ever had. You know it!

But then, you start to think about each one of your three goals. What if your friend never reciprocates? What if you sign up to the gym, work out, but do not see any gains? What if you don't do so well as a student and your career never advances? Maybe you have overcommitted with those three major goals. Maybe you only need two. You call your friend to cancel your meetup. You can always do that another time. Then you remember that going back to school needs money and you did not get that project that could have set you up for a promotion. You are no longer going back to school. You will only work on your fitness. Yeah, that's a decent enough goal. For next year.

Do you see how cunning overthinking is? Do you see how it steals from your focus? The whole time all those things are happening in your mind, you could have been working on one of your goals but instead, it keeps you disorganized and unfocused. The antidote to this lies in the paradox of focus. According to this paradox, if you make the most of one opportunity, more opportunities will come your way. Moving boldly toward one direction reveals more paths before you so that when you focus on less, you get more.

You may be wondering how this is possible. How can focusing on less get you more? For example, if you do only one thing and one thing alone, how will you know whether something else may have been better suited for you? What if there was something else you could enjoy doing more? A lot of time, focus and curiosity-driven overthinking tend to be at odds. It makes

you feel like you need to focus on everything that makes you curious. Yet, there is a balance between focus and curiosity. Think about yourself for a moment. What things are you focused on right now that do not deserve the amount of energy you are giving them? What if you could re-channel that energy toward one vitally important outcome that you have only been giving divided attention?

OVERTHINKING AND FOCUS – FROM SCIENCE

Do you remember the last time you lost yourself in a task? In those moments, you get a rush of productivity. You are not just busy, you are in the zone. Those moments come with a strong feeling and sense of purpose and you completely lose track of time. Whether you refer to it as flow, being in the zone, concentration, or whatever, you can admit that the feeling is exhilarating. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, one of the earliest researchers to look into flow, described it as a universal experience that is neither passive, relaxing, or receptive, but has you stretched to your limits in a voluntary effort to do something difficult but meaningful. Flow occurs when the challenge you are facing is equal to your skill level.

To most overthinkers, this type of concentration is unheard of. They may be truly focused for a few minutes, but one thought is enough to get them out of the zone and into a thought loop. This is not to say that overthinkers lack skill, rather, overthinkers undermine their skill. Instead of actively applying what they know to deal with a challenge, they are busy wondering whether they really know how to, or they are stuck overthinking their output. They end up never truly focusing.

Research shows that focusing on one task is a top-down process. When you decide to shift your focus to a specific thing, your brain collects all the visual information about it and begins processing it to tell you how you are doing at any one point with regards to your goal. It is a lot like looking at a photo for the first time. When you can see the image clearly, your brain is able to direct itself to the one aspect you want to give your attention to. When you achieve the kind of concentration where time just slips by, your brain arranges your perception around your aims. You get an increased ability to ignore outside stimuli unless you lose focus.

To be fair, losing focus is natural. It is even desirable. It is a system of evolution meant to keep you safe. In essence, it is bottom-down. Your brain notices things that need your attention and evolution demands that you break concentration when you encounter something rewarding or

dangerous. The problem is, after your focus is lost, it takes over 20 minutes to go back to what you were originally doing, according to researchers from the University of California. There are other studies that place the time of refocus at five minutes. Either way, interruptions are costly. For example, at work, if you are interrupted every ten minutes, and it takes you five minutes after each interruption to go back to work, how much time are you losing?

Research shows that 44% of the time, you interrupt yourself. Overthinkers interrupt themselves 56% of the time. The human mind can focus on one task for two hours. So why is this so hard to get to? You can blame overthinking for this. It conditions your brain to be unfocused. A study by researchers at Stanford university compared self-confessed overthinkers on different scales and found that the chronic overthinker has a harder time ignoring irrelevant cues.

In a world where knowing a lot, having no particular calling, and having a lot of potential is a compliment, – multipotentialite – overthinking can make you feel like you are doing more than you actually are. It can make you feel good, even at the expense of your cognitive needs. But the problem is, it makes you a worse person. It causes you to miss subtle cues and make mistakes. Steve Jobs talked about focus in a way that sheds some light on the paradox of focus. According to him, focus is not just saying yes to what you are focusing on. It is also saying no to many other good ideas that you could pursue.

If you are still doubtful about how narrowing your view and focus can make your life better, think about Apple, the company. Job's company became as successful as it is because it focused on fewer products than its competitors and made them exceptional. So yes, you cannot deal with overthinking without a commitment to be singular when it comes to the things that truly matter in life. So how do you stay focused?

SIX WAYS TO STAY FOCUSED

Connect with your values

What things do you value the most out of life? Take a piece of paper and write everything that comes to mind as you answer the following questions:

- What's important to you in life?
- If you could have any career, without worrying about money or other practical constraints, what would you do?
- When you're reading news stories, what sort of story or behavior tends to inspire you?
- What type of story or behavior makes you angry?
- What do you want to change about the world or about yourself?
- What are you most proud of?
- When are you the happiest?

Here are some common examples values:

Loyalty

Kindness

Altruism

Spirituality

Integrity

Empathy

Humility

Courage

Selflessness

Honesty

Trustworthiness

Determination

Once you have your list of values, narrow them down to only five values. These will be your starting point. Remember that there is a difference between the things you value and your core values. The things you value come and go. Your core values are consistent for the most part of your life. You can structure your life around them. The idea is to consciously make choices that align with these values so that you are always in touch with what you can do and will not do without. Your values are your life's backbone. They inform your boundaries. They mold you into the kind of person you want to be and support you when things get a little rough.

Decide what to commit to

There are always many commitments to meet in life – a friend wants to hang out, a family member needs a favor, your boss expects you to work overtime, your child needs your attention, and the list goes on. Out of all your commitments, evaluate the ones that align with the values you listed. These will represent your primary obligations. They are a promise to yourself that you will see them to completion. Make sure you keep all the essential commitments. You can renegotiate them if you need to, but never take new ones before honoring your primary commitments. That way, you focus on what really matters and reduce the likelihood of spending your days overthinking things that have no value to you. You can use the following table to organize your commitments, following the example provided:

Values

Commitments

Behaviors and habits

Eg. Integrity

Finish work on time and meet my deadlines

Communicate when I have too much on my plate

Set aside time to talk with my partner

Follow through on the promises I make

As you do this exercise, pay attention to any habits, behaviors, or commitments that you have that do not align with your values. The idea is to replace those commitments with the ones that align with your values.

Declutter your life

Once you know your values and commitments, look at everything you have. Do you need it all? What do you have that is often a gateway to overthinking? Whatever it is, get rid of it. Remove anything from your life that you have not found useful in the last two years. You can give them to someone who could use them. You can even sell those items. As you are doing this, remove psychological and emotional clutter as well. Get rid of things that you are doing that no longer serve you but that you keep doing out of habit. Letting go of the old will make room for new things that line up with who you are and where you are on your life journey.

Examine the way you use your time

After completing the first three steps, it is time to zoom in on your daily routine. What chores and activities are fixed in your daily routine? What things are necessary? Ask yourself how much time you spend on social media, for example, and how does that compare with the time you spend on non-urgent things like emails? The idea here is to determine the amount of time in your day that you spend on distractions. How much time do you spend every day listening to the radio, reading magazines, or watching TV? What about small talk? How much of your time is spent gossiping with colleagues or self-distracting by scrolling through your newsfeed? If you spend two hours a day on social media, that's 730 hours every year. You spend a whole month out of your 12 months online. Imagine that!

Find out which distractions you can get rid of and determine what you will do with the time you create if you curtail many of your daily activities. Decide beforehand how much time is healthy to spend on social media, responding to emails, watching TV, reading magazines and so forth. This

will help you to gain the time to focus on the things that matter. If you spend less time on distractions, then you have more time to allocate to things that align with your values and goals.

Use the Eisenhower matrix to manage your time

The Eisenhower matrix is a great way to prioritize everything you need to do. It prioritizes what is important and empowers you to work toward your goals. It promotes proper planning and execution and removes guesswork from your day-to-day activity, minimizing the chances that you will overthink. It also challenges you so that you do not waste time on habitual but unimportant things. Use it to objectively assess how you spend your days and make the necessary adjustments. Before I break it down, here is what it looks like:

The Eisenhower Matrix		
	Urgent	Not Urgent
Important	DO it today	SCHEDULE a time to do it
Not Important	DELEGATE it to someone else	ELIMINATE. Stop doing this

Once you assess how you spend your time, you have to regroup and choose to work only on what is important. Most of the time, we shift our focus to only what feels urgent and forget what is truly important. That means that we barely survive as we try to get through our to-do list. Yet, the

meaningful things are left undone. I would like to suggest a tool that you can use to order your days – the Eisenhower Matrix. It is a concept popularized by Stephen Covey and is said to have been used by president Dwight D. Eisenhower. At the heart of it are two questions – is this activity important? Is it urgent? Take a piece of paper and divide it into four parts/quadrants. You will ask yourself these questions as you fill them out according to the following guidelines:

FIRST QUADRANT – URGENT

In this quadrant, you put only the things that have the highest priority. What needs to be done now? Try and keep the tasks here as few as possible. The goal is to eliminate them, so if you spend a lot of time here, you are only trouble-shooting. You will never have time to plan for long-term goals. If you have a number of tasks here that seem to have the same level of urgency, reassess them and reprioritize. If you meet unplanned demands from other people, respond by committing to handle them at a later date. That way, you can do what is important to you and manage their expectations.

SECOND QUADRANT – NOT URGENT, BUT IMPORTANT

You want to give most of your time to this quadrant. Things here are important and you have time to do them well. Tasks here can be done efficiently. Most people neglect tasks in this quadrant but they are the most important. You need to set aside time every day to do them so that they do not need to move them to quadrant 1 in the future. If necessary, do these tasks when you are uninterrupted. How much of your time do you spend here? Ideally, that should be 60% of your day.

THIRD QUADRANT – URGENT, BUT NOT IMPORTANT

If possible, have no tasks in this quadrant. Doing things that fall in this category makes you busy, but you are not productive. Scrutinize tasks in this quadrant and re-assess them. As a rule of thumb, decide the way forward for these tasks as soon as they come up. If you can avoid them, then do so. They are often external so you can help the people assigning them to you to find another way to meet their needs.

FOURTH QUADRANT – NOT URGENT AND NOT IMPORTANT

Tasks in this quadrant are activities that you escape to when you don't want to do what is in quadrant one and two. They may cause you to postpone activities in quadrant 2 until they get to quadrant 1. By then, it is too late to do them well. Most of the time, this quadrant will have habits that comfort you and give you an escape from discipline. They are often stress-related so take some time to understand why you do them. Note that leisure activities should be scheduled into your day, but that should be deliberate, not default.

Manage your tasks by doing accurate work

Once you are connected to your values, committed to the right things, have gotten rid of distractions and clutter, and are using your time right, the next thing you need to do is to practice extreme intentionality. It is to make accurate actions and power moves. Extreme intentionality is about defining the best version of yourself and then consistently delivering that. It is about controlling your everyday actions with sniper-like focus and intention.

Snipers are trained to go into dangerous areas, perform reconnaissance, and leave without being seen. That's the hardest part of the job – not the shooting, even if the shooting is important. Staying invisible while moving between points with heavy gear and in difficult weather while sometimes completely exhausted requires that the sniper be tremendously focused. The discomfort, fatigue, and racing thoughts are distractions that can throw them off and mess their invisibility, which is what keeps them alive. When external stimuli threaten to take over, the sniper has been trained to stop and notice their environment with their senses. That way, they take a small time out and refocus. They can then stop reacting to external stimuli and focus on the job at hand.

This idea can also help you to control your work days when you are tempted to react to emails, texts, and other people's priorities. To do this, start by defining what constitutes accurate work. By definition, accurate work is work that moves you toward your goal. It often involves tasks found within quadrant 1 and 2 in the Eisenhower matrix, although not all tasks that fall under those quadrants constitute accurate work.

Imagine your goal is to build a seven-figure business in two years. You prioritize your decisions using the Eisenhower matrix and find some tasks like branding, video gaming, and selling your merchandise within quadrant 1 and 2. Video gaming helps you relax. It is good for your downtime and often helps you decompress. It is important for your mental health, but as far as the goal is concerned, it gives you zero movement towards it. Branding is also important, but it only contributes a slight movement towards your goal while selling merchandise moves you huge steps toward your goal. In this example, selling merchandise is accurate work. It moves you toward your goal fast.

Doing accurate work is about task management. Since task management will always trump time management if the two are pitched against each other, it is important to not only identify, but prioritize, accurate work above all else. There is a common story that illustrates my point very well. It is referred to as the 'big rocks of life' or 'jar of life,' or another similar name, but regardless of the version, the message stays the same. Here is my version of the story to keep the timeless wisdom alive.

A professor entered his philosophy class, greeted the students, and announced that they were going to do an experiment. From his bag, he removed a mason jar and put it in front of him. Then he removed stones from the same bag and the students started murmuring as he put the stones in the jar, one after another until the jar was full. He looked at his students and asked them whether the jar was full, to which they agreed. He paused for a moment and then pulled a small bag of pebbles from his bag. He poured them into the jar and rattled it so that the pebbles slipped through and settled in the jar.

'Tell me,' said the professor, 'was the jar really full after I put the stones?' 'Apparently not,' murmured some students. 'Is it full now?' The room was silent. At last, a meek voice said 'No.' Following that answer, the professor removed another bag full of sand and he poured it into the jar. The sand occupied the spaces between the pebbles and stones. He asked the students again whether the jar was full and the students all said it wasn't. Finally, he reached for his cup of coffee and poured it into the jar until it was full.

Then, he asked his students, ‘if the jar is your life, what do you learn from this experiment?’

One lady shouted, ‘Regardless of how busy you think you are, you can always do more.’ ‘That’s one view,’ said the professor. ‘Eventually, you will burn out though.’ ‘The other view is that the large stones are the things in life that are most important to you. Order your priorities. If you do not attend to them first, you will never have room for them. You will be busy with the pebbles, and sand of life.’ This is the essence of accurate work. ‘What of the coffee?’ asked another student. The professor smiled, ‘No matter how busy you are, you can always have coffee with a friend.’ The question then is, what are the large stones in your life? Here are a few tips to identify accurate actions:

1. Obsessively ask yourself: what actions maximally contribute to the outcome I want?
2. Sacrifice the trivial. If you notice something has little impact on your goal, be willing to sacrifice it. Group chats, friendly calls, email, and social media could all be trivial depending on your goal.
3. Avoid duplicate work.
4. Keep asking the question until you make the outcome a reality.

GET EMPOWERED

No one can become focused in one day. There's no shortcut. There is no magic. It takes plenty of work and will demand a lot of effort and mindfulness. However, to make it more likely that focus becomes a habit, you can use the Pomodoro technique. With the technique, you schedule to work on a task for 25 minutes and then take a five-minute break. After doing that four times, you take a longer break. If you find it hard to begin with 25 minutes, you can start with 15 minutes and then work your way upward.

The technique was developed by Francesco Cirillo. He applied it to his study time and found that he was more productive breaking his tasks into short time intervals. The technique is named after the kitchen timer he used that was shaped like a tomato. Breaking your work down into time intervals works because you can estimate what you get done within that time and control your urge to procrastinate when your time is limited. The breaks keep you focused and fresh.

However, when it comes to bigger tasks, you may find that 25 minutes will not work. If you are in the zone, go on for as long as you can and then take a break when it feels natural. Silence potential sources of distraction and give yourself wholly to the task at hand. Remember, the more you focus on the task at hand, the clearer you make your vision. With the task complete, you will be able to see the next task and you will be further in life as a result.



THE TAKEAWAY

Overthinking cheats you out of staying focused. Your mind and your efforts are always wandering, never settling on one thing, one task, one goal, or one thought. To deal with this, you have to commit to staying focused:

- Connect with your values
- Decide what to commit to
- Declutter your life
- Examine at the way you use your time
- Use the Eisenhower matrix as a time management tool
- Manage your tasks by doing accurate work

THE PARADOX OF SELF-LOVE - NURTURE YOURSELF FIRST

Overthinkers tend to spend a lot of their time contemplating the past, future, current, and hypothetical situations and this worsens when they are anxious, trying to get some sleep, or dealing with a difficult situation. You bring up an event from three years ago where you gave an awkward response to a greeting and feel embarrassed that you cannot change that. You imagine the worst about the future and then try to psych yourself up to avoid it. Instead, you wear yourself out over things you cannot control. You repeatedly revisit a conversation you had with someone until you create meanings that cast their words in a negative light. These things work together to give you low self-esteem and self-doubt, which in turn trigger overthinking.

When thinking of yourself, you imagine an awkward person or an unsuccessful person who is to be made fun of. You constantly tell yourself that you are clumsy, embarrassing, and socially inept. Of course, these things are probably not true, but you convince yourself otherwise as you overthink. Your first mistake is that you evaluate the past and your mistakes incorrectly. You forget that everyone makes mistakes. We can never know exactly what the true or correct response is in a situation. But when the overthinker makes mistakes, they feel disappointed and embarrassed by who they are. Sometimes they cannot let these feelings go.

Let me ask you a question; do you remember every embarrassing thing an acquaintance of yours has done? Of course, not – you cannot possibly remember, and neither can they remember yours. What I am trying to say is

that most of our mistakes pass by unnoticed or are quickly forgotten. Only the overthinker keeps beating themselves up over their mistakes. Unless they are conscious of what is happening, they never pause to glean the lessons, forgive, and forget. They never work to change themselves or their circumstances. They only fixate on their regret, which wastes their mental energy. They allow themselves to be consumed by everything they did wrong without considering what they did right.

The second mistake you make as you overthink is worrying about things you cannot control. You worry about losing a loved one. You become anxious over an upcoming interview, run through all the ways things could go wrong even though you do not know what you are walking into. You imagine all the ways you could fail and this causes you to think poorly of yourself. Eventually, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, continuing your descent into low self-esteem. You start approaching situations without confidence and trust in your abilities, giving up before you even start.

It is worth noting that planning ahead is not the same as unnecessary worry. When you stop thinking clearly, you have crossed the line. Take the toilet paper crisis when the Covid-19 pandemic hit, for example. A person planning ahead would have picked three packs of toilet paper to store and use for some months. People who were worrying unnecessarily went to the mall intending to buy a year's worth of supplies and got angry when they could not do it. Overthinkers always worry unnecessarily. They often extend themselves in situations that are not urgent to save themselves from feeling unprepared. This lowers their self-esteem.

Finally, because they are constantly replaying scenarios and conversations, overthinkers commonly hold grudges and judgements against others, which also lowers their self-esteem. You end up ruining your support networks, relationships, and opportunities through your needless overthinking and inability to forgive. Sometimes overthinkers also have poor boundaries which means that they entertain relationships that cause them grief, worsening the situation. Holding grudges heightens your anxiety about situations you cannot control and lowers your self-esteem so that you end up sabotaging relationships because of bitterness and resentment.

It is worth noting here that for the most part, low self-esteem (brought by overthinking) is mutually exclusive to self-love. By definition, self-esteem is how you judge your worth, while self-love is how that judgment drives you to treat yourself. Both are progressive, but self-love determines our happiness. If you want lasting love, you must learn to love yourself because your relationships mirror your relationship with yourself.

As they do all these things, overthinkers tell themselves that they are thinking to decide the best action, but then they manipulate their thoughts negatively and harm their opinions of others. In so doing, they cripple themselves from ever enjoying what self-love can do. According to the paradox of self-love, the more you can love yourself, the more you can love others. The more you can love others, the easier it is to forgive, live calmly and let go of negative thoughts about them.

THE SCIENCE BEHIND SELF-DOUBT

Scientists have theories about what is happening in the brain when you are stuck in a cycle of self-doubt and low self-esteem related to overthinking. Your brain can change over time. Scientists call it neural plasticity. Since doubt is one of the emotions that get stuck in your mind, learning to challenge it is necessary to overcoming it. Research has associated self-doubt with three emotional systems in the brain, which served an evolutionary purpose.

The first one is the threat response system, commonly called fight-or-flight. It helps you respond when you are threatened. Criticism or self-criticism can stimulate this system. The brain processes self-criticism as a real threat so that when you doubt yourself, this system is activated. Your brain releases cortisol which causes you to flee and hide. Avoidance in this case is an automated defense mechanism to protect yourself from yourself. Fortunately, the other two systems can override this response.

The second system is the drive system that causes your brain to release dopamine. Dopamine motivates you to go after your goals in life – partners, skills, or resources. It is the approach system that causes you to take action. It activates when you have low self-doubt.

The final system is the mammalian caregiver. It drives nurture and also activates when you have low self-doubt. It is the foundation for trust and the antidote for depression. Speaking from the perspective of evolution, this is the system that helped us care for our babies. It triggers the brain to release the love hormone – oxytocin – that regulates sexual reproduction, social interaction, and fosters generosity and empathy. This third response is not only ancient, it is also hormonal. It allows us to act with compassion toward ourselves and toward others.

These three systems work together to regulate your sense of self, self-control, and to inform your response to the situations you encounter. The key to dealing with self-doubt is to minimize the threat system and activate

the other two systems more frequently. Here are some ways you can begin to do that:

FIVE STEPS TO DEAL WITH SELF-DOUBT

Become more self-aware

Have you heard of the famous saying, ‘remain true to yourself?’ It is excellent advice, but it is not easy to follow when you do not know who you are. Developing self-awareness will help you understand yourself more and have an accurate assessment of what you are capable of. You need to know more about yourself before you can develop a healthy self-esteem and practice self-love. Self-awareness is about being aware and confident in who you are. It is connected to knowing your values, preferences, beliefs, and tendencies. By becoming self-aware, you understand your limitations and strengths and you can have a genuine relationship with people because you present yourself as who you really are.

In this case, the first thing you need to assess is your belief system. You cannot develop self-love if you are still held back by your limiting beliefs and cognitive distortions. Limiting beliefs are beliefs which hold you back in one way or another, from thinking, saying, or doing the things that you want to do, or those that help you grow. These beliefs can be divided into the following categories:

- Beliefs around our actions and choices – I do/don’t statements
- Beliefs around self-efficacy and image – I can/can’t statements
- Beliefs about our self-judgments or blame – I should/shouldn’t statements
- Beliefs about identity – I am/I am not statements E.g., I am stupid
- Beliefs about others and their thoughts – They will/are statements

It will take some time and effort to become more aware of your thoughts and beliefs. Taking a moment to pause in the middle of an intense emotion and ask yourself how you got there does not come naturally, but doing it will be worth it. It is the surest way to start understanding your limiting beliefs. The idea is to be alert when you experience negative emotions. When you are anxious, depressed, or angry, question the behaviors you

exhibit. What triggers them? Think of the situations that evoke these feelings as some sort of alarm. Here are some examples:

- You are about to go out with your friends and you start sweating and your heart races. You are anxious.
- You argue with your partner the same day you had a difficult meeting at work. The arguments are sparked by small things like chores.
- You feel depressed after being alone for an evening. You are so lonely you cannot stomach it.

An alarm could be any type of situation. Once you identify it, think of similar situations you have been in that bring about the same discomfort or emotion. Do they affect your mood? Identify as many triggers as you can and get specific. They will help you to get more familiar with your limiting beliefs.

Challenge your thoughts and beliefs

Once you have a list of limiting beliefs, the next thing is to challenge them. Ask yourself the following questions about each of your thoughts.

1. Is it realistic?
2. Is it based on facts or feelings?
3. Do I have evidence to support it?
4. Am I reading the evidence correctly?
5. Am I simplifying a complicated situation?
6. Is this thought habitual or factual?

Bear in mind that thoughts come quickly and leave just as fast so it may be difficult to question them at the moment. You can take time to analyze them in your journal even when they are not taking place in real-time. As you get more familiar with your tendencies, it will get easier to deal with them in real time. Answering these questions will give you an opportunity to analyze and evaluate your thoughts against the truth. Let go of any thoughts that are not based on truth.

Build self-efficacy

Icek Azjen, a psychology professor, coined the theory of planned behavior, which suggests that your decision to do something is predicated by your intention. That is, your intention motivates your behavior. It mirrors your willingness to try something and how much effort you will put to get it done. The stronger your intention, the stronger your behavior will be. He went on to say that intentions are determined by your personal attitudes, subjective norms, and your perceived behavioral control. By definition, perceived behavioral control is your belief that you can control how you behave. It depends on perceptions of your ability.

Azjen went on to argue that behavioral control affects our intentions so that the more control we think we have over how we act, the stronger we intend to perform the specific action. It also affects our behavior in that we try harder when we think we have a high level of control. This theory ties in with Albert Bandura's concept of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is your judgment of how well you can execute an action. Self-efficacy is not self-worth or self-image, even though they are sometimes used to mean the same thing.

Self-efficacy is the belief in your abilities to meet the challenges that come your way. It is your overall belief in your ability to succeed. It is different from self-esteem in that self-esteem is more about 'being' while self-efficacy is active. Of course, a high self-esteem can improve your self-efficacy, the same way high self-efficacy can improve your self-esteem, but they are different. In the same way, self-efficacy is tied to motivation. It is the belief in your capacity to achieve while motivation stems from your desire to achieve.

Finally, self-efficacy is tied to self-confidence and self-love even though they are not similar. Self-confidence is about the strength of belief without specifying the belief, but self-efficacy is the belief in your capabilities to deal with challenges and achieve a specific result. In his research, Albert Bandura noticed that self-efficacy plays a huge role in influencing the events of people's lives. He proposed that it influences how you cope with stress and determines the effort to expend to solve your problems. In that

sense, it is self-sustaining. The more you solve your problems, the more they boost your self-efficacy and the more you learn to love yourself. He identified a number of sources of self-efficacy:

1. Verbal persuasion
2. Visualization
3. Vicarious experiences
4. Mastery experiences
5. Emotional and physiological states

To put it simply, a person with a high self-efficacy has an internal locus of control. They believe they have the power to change life events. If, after you fail a test, you have thoughts like ‘I only failed because the teacher doesn’t like me’ or ‘there was nothing I could do to change my score,’ your locus of control is external. You need to build your sense of belief in your abilities.

As it turns out, a person with an internal locus of control or high self-efficacy can quickly own their failures and mistakes, a quality inherent to self-love. They are willing to accept blame when it is theirs. At the same time, self-efficacy is also connected to anxiety. Low self-efficacy causes greater anxiety because you believe you do not have control over a situation and cannot manage the challenges that come with it.

Determine your strengths

Understanding your strengths is an important part of self-awareness and self-love. It is about taking control of your efforts. It is how you grow in the right areas. By reflecting on and analyzing your strengths, you know how to use them every day to better your situations. To know your strengths, you can take the VIA test, the Myers Briggs test, the Enneagram, or Big 5 test. The VIA test is available for free. It will help you gain clarity that you will need in your decision making. Then, knowing your strengths, you will be able to focus on them and overcome self-doubt while rewiring your perception of yourself and nurturing your self-love.

Improve your self-determination

Psychologists define self-determination as the ability to make choices and manage your life. It allows you to feel the control you have over your life and choices, and affects how motivated you are to take an action that will affect the outcome in your situations. The concept can be applied to different areas of life to help you become more confident in yourself. The self-determination theory suggests that you are motivated to grow and change by three universal and innate needs. You become self-determined when your need for connection, autonomy, and competence are fulfilled. Simply put, you are driven by the need to grow and be fulfilled.

The theory assumes that mastering challenges and gaining new experiences are necessary if you will develop a cohesive sense of self and grow to love it. It also suggests that you need to be motivated by intrinsic factors, not just external rewards like money or fame. According to the theory, you need to feel that taking action will play a major role in changing your circumstances (autonomy), a mastery of tasks and skills (competence), and a sense of belonging (connection) to grow.

Imagine someone who doesn't finish an important work assignment. If they are highly self-determined, they will admit their mistake, believing that they can fix the problem. Then they will take the appropriate action to correct the mistake. In a similar situation, a person with low self-determination will look to share blame. They may even refuse to admit they had any role in failing to do the assignment. They hardly feel motivated to fix their mistake. Instead, they cave in to feelings of helplessness, believing that they can take no action to remedy the situation.

Self-determination plays a significant role in how you function. In the workplace, you will feel more motivated and engaged if you are self-determined. In competitive situations, you are more likely to excel. In social settings, you are better able to create close and affectionate relationships with others. In short, improving your self-determination helps many areas of your life. To nurture your self-determination, change how you think of your life. Believe that, in the face of challenges, you control how your life turns out. That will help you apply yourself to do better, rather than succumb to self-doubt.

GET EMPOWERED

It is one thing to deal with self-doubt, but how do you overcome overthinking in the long-run? All the techniques in the world for fighting self-doubt will not help you if you are not taking care of yourself. But the question is: how do you nurture yourself when your default is to make everyone else a priority over you? This section is about self-care. It is about learning how to rejuvenate and make sure that you always show up to life at your best. You see, the more you neglect your needs, the less able you will be to care for others and the easier it will be to slide into self-doubt and overthinking. Self-care is about nourishing yourself. It can range from the things you eat to activities that feed your soul.

If you have a hard time understanding the concept of self-care, think about this – if you constantly run on empty, you will be impatient with yourself and those around you. You will make mistakes that will cause you to overthink even more. You can set aside a bit of your time for self-care - the duration doesn't matter, just that you do it. There are three types of self-care you can practice:

1. Physical self-care - It is about activities that nurture your physical body such as taking naps or regular exercise.
2. Social self-care - Involves taking care of your relational needs. We are not meant to live in isolation, so any activity that meets the need for community and belonging could be social self-care.
3. Mental self-care - Centers around your mind and emotions. For example, taking an emotional management class can be self-care.

Whichever the category, remember that you are worth taking care of and schedule self-care into your day. Having an effective self-care routine will help you to reduce burnout, stress, and anxiety, increase your energy and improve your resilience.



THE TAKEAWAY

Self-doubt can cause overthinking and overthinking can drive you deeper into self-doubt. The two are inevitably intertwined. You can begin dealing with self-doubt by:

- Becoming more self aware
- Challenging your thoughts and limiting beliefs
- Building self-efficacy
- Determining your strengths
- Improving your self-determination

As you do these things, be sure to schedule self-care into your day. It is the thing that makes you more likely to stick the course out of overthinking.

THE PARADOX OF CHANGE - ACCEPT YOURSELF

By definition, self-acceptance is the state of embracing who you are without any exceptions, conditions, or qualifications. The academics define self-acceptance as a person's acceptance of his or her positive or negative attributes. By this definition, self-acceptance must involve accepting every facet of who you are. It is not just embracing the good, positive, or valuable; true self-acceptance demands that you embrace the negative, less desirable, and ugly parts of who you are.

Many people struggle to accept themselves fully, but the struggle is worse for overthinkers. They sometimes find it easy to accept their strengths, but their failures and flaws are hard to stomach, so they are filled with an overwhelming sense of rejection and judgment. They are, put another way, very hard on themselves. The overthinker finds it hard to get over their weaknesses and failures because they lack self-acceptance. Self-acceptance - used synonymously with self-approval - is necessary for your psychological well-being. Without self-acceptance, you obsess over your failures and become extremely self-critical. Of course, these negative emotions will hold you back from becoming everything that you can become and living the life you want.

The funny thing is, accepting the reality of your life sounds easy. Yet, many overthinkers live in their convoluted version of reality based on denial, disappointment, regret, or just waiting for something better. Think about it, how exactly do you live your life? Have you accepted who you are and the situations you are in? This is how self-acceptance would look like:

- A man who has just been served divorced papers might feel like a failure, but with self-acceptance, he accepts that he made some mistakes, his marriage failed, but he is not a failure.
- A woman with anorexia might accept that she is human and her body is imperfect and that is okay. Rather than approaching her imperfection in a way that harms her, self-acceptance gives her a healthy perspective.
- A student who is hardworking but only receives Cs and at best Bs, could accept himself and the fact that taking tests are not his strong suit. He could embrace the fact that he has other strengths.
- A girl battling low self-esteem may embrace self-acceptance which would enable her to confront her cognitive distortions and negative beliefs, finally realizing that not all her thoughts are true.
- An employee struggling to meet goals may accept herself and the fact that sometimes she will fail to deliver and she will still be a good person even then.

The list of examples could go on, but I think you are starting to see the point. From the moment we enter this world, our experience is determined by our caregivers. They influence the way we see and understand ourselves because as toddlers, we have no concept of self. For example, if your caregiver loved, accepted, and encouraged you, self-acceptance may come a bit easier to you than it would for someone who had the opposite experience.

Then, when we are old enough to go to school, we enter a world where we are measured by our performance in class and on tests, as well as how we assimilate with peers. All these things have a role to play in self-acceptance. As we grow older still, people judge us by our relationships, our status, or life circumstances and, if we are not careful, we judge ourselves by the same things. These things inevitably influence whether or not we readily accept ourselves. Self-acceptance can be very difficult if you live in a place where inclusion, equity, and diversity are low, you have made mistakes, have lived through trauma, or if you have imposter syndrome. So, to some extent, self-acceptance is hard for everyone, but more so for overthinkers. The good news is that there are practical ways you can accept yourself now,

just as you are, no matter how hard it has been to practice self-acceptance in the past.

Of course, this is difficult for the overthinker. How do you even begin to accept the things that you really want to change? How do you accept yourself as a person who's prone to ruminating? Yet, however counterintuitive it sounds, the journey to overcoming overthinking must begin at self-acceptance. According to the paradox of change, the more you try to be something you are not, the more you will stay where you are. The more you accept yourself, the more likely you are to change. It is only when you accept yourself that you can begin the process of meaningful change. That is, you have to acknowledge your undesirable traits before you can begin improving.

Here, I do not only mean self-acceptance, but unconditional self-acceptance. This means, you accept who you are, not only when you are kicking self-doubt and changing your self-talk, but also when you give in to overthinking and get stuck again in that thought loop. You accept yourself not only when you are winning at life, but also at your lowest, with your flaws and faults. Russell Grieger, a therapist, described unconditional self-acceptance as understanding that you are not your qualities and actions. It is accepting that you have flaws and you have made mistakes, but they do not need to define you.

Grieger went on to say that human beings are by nature fallible – they are imperfect. You will do well on some days, but you will make mistakes on others. The trick is to treat yourself without judgment. Unconditional self-acceptance allows you to love yourself, live authentically, and work on self-improvement from an empowered place. It is important to note that self-acceptance is not the same as self-esteem. Even though they are connected, they are distinct. They are similar in that both are centered on how you relate with yourself but they differ in that, self-esteem refers to how you feel about who you are while self-acceptance is acknowledging and accepting that you are as you are.

Seltzer, another psychologist, put it this way – self-esteem is about the value or worth you attribute to yourself while self-acceptance is a global

affirmation of yourself. When you accept yourself, you embrace everything you are, even the parts that are less than ideal. Of course, complete self-acceptance can lay groundwork for positive self-esteem and the two work together often, but you have to remember the distinction as you work on yourself.

THE PSYCHOLOGY BEHIND THE PARADOX OF CHANGE

Most of the time, when people dislike something about themselves, they want to change it so badly, so they try to act as if they do not have the particular habit. If it is a situation they want to change, they might want to believe and try to make it appear to others that the situation is different. For example, if you are depressed, you might appear before your friends faking a smile because you so desperately want to feel better. Yet, according to the paradox of change, the change process starts by embracing that depression. You do not change because you are trying to change. Change comes from not changing.

This theory was further developed by a psychotherapist and physician called Arnold Beisser. Before he became a physician, he was paralyzed because of polio at 25 years. This momentous event set into motion the kind of work he would ultimately do. Paralysis could have stopped a lesser man, but Besser developed a theory of change by encountering challenges and then changing. He theorized that change starts when you stop trying to be what you are not and start being who you are.

At 24, Beisser had graduated from Stanford and completed his internship. He was planning to begin his surgical residency. It was the 1950s and the US was fighting in Korea so the man was called to active duty. While waiting to go to war, he spent his days playing tennis and even won a national championship. He was strong, healthy, young and seemingly invincible. A few days after he turned 25, he caught polio and got paralyzed from the neck down. After his accident, he decided to still build a life he could love.

For him, a minor ailment was life-threatening. He had to use a respirator for about 16 hours every day and he always had an iron lung on standby. Still, he scheduled time to see patients and visit with friends. But before he got there, he had to deal with the 'why me' question that assails anyone dealing with the bereavement process. He battled with it, trying to will himself to change his mindset until he gave up. Then, he caved to the pain of loss and

as if by magic, his view of life started changing. Thus, his research into the theory of the paradox of change began.

Beisser's story testifies to the fact that even with misfortune, there is no knowing what you may go on to do. Acceptance opens your life up to countless possibilities. Through acceptance, inevitably and paradoxically, change happens. Once you embrace being, change happens because of things around you. To stay faithful to that person you are, you change in response to the world and people around you. To put it in blunt terms, trying is lying. Who you are now is who you are now. There is no point in trying to appear like someone else.

Before Beisser developed the paradox of change, two other scientists in the 1940s used it as a basis for counseling and therapy. In therapy, the practitioner will help you understand what you are doing now and how you are doing it so that you can learn to accept yourself or to change. This chapter will serve the same purpose. It will help you to accept that you cannot make yourself change in line with an external ideal, but you will change by nature in a meaningful, organic, and orderly way if you allow yourself to be who you are. The approaches provided later in this chapter are underpinned by two ideas – be who you are and self-regulate.

Do not buy into the idea of being a change agent when it comes to overthinking. The better approach is to be where you are. It is difficult to move if you do not start from a place of sure footing and that place comes from allowing yourself to be who you really are. Most of the time, recovering overthinkers constantly move between who they feel they should be and who they really are. When you notice that happening, acceptance is your best approach. It returns you to a position of wholeness. If you actively try to change, you create a disparity between the you who is the 'top dog' and the other who is the 'underdog.' This constant battle will cause you to overthink even more. Instead, you need to fully experience yourself in that moment. Like Marcel Proust said, 'you are healed when you experience suffering in full.' For example, rather than refusing to be angry and then cultivating resentment, allow yourself to experience the feeling and it will dissipate.

The second principle that underpins the exercises in this chapter is self-regulation. Think of yourself as an organism. If you are, then that means that physical and mental activity are not separate. They are just different ways of operating as one organism. Self-regulation in this case includes all the creative adjustments and choices you have to make as you go through your day so that you can adapt to circumstances and change. It happens according to need. Thinking of yourself as an organism means that you will regulate yourself according to the needs that come up naturally as you go about your day.

A perfect example of the kind of self-regulation I am talking about includes going to sleep when you feel sleepy or visiting the washroom when you feel that your bladder is full. Eating when you are hungry also falls under this category, but the examples can get more complicated. For example, defending yourself when you are attacked could be self-regulation and so could disagreeing with opinions that you object to. In the same breath, it may be self-regulation to leave a job that you find unfulfilling or to express yourself through art when you feel inspired and creative. Essentially, it is about responding to your needs.

Bear in mind that this need is spontaneous. It is an impulse that comes from your whole self. Most of the time, that impulse may contradict another impulse or it could be that two impulses cannot be fulfilled at the same time. If that is the case, then you have to choose depending on your environment and your priorities. Of course, since the whole of who you are has been affected by how you were schooled, brought up, and your environment, this kind of self-regulation is also influenced. This means that it will not always be straightforward, especially as you recover from overthinking.

Imagine this – you feel sleepy, but you are told that you cannot sleep because you are in class. In class, you have to pay attention. Or imagine that you feel the urge to go to the toilet, but your boss will not allow you to leave the meeting before it ends. Or what if you feel hungry but your family will start commenting about your eating habits if you get a snack. Or suppose you want to defend yourself because you are under physical attack, but you have always been told that physical violence is not permissible or

acceptable. Maybe you want to disagree with a viewpoint you find offensive but you have always had your viewpoints undermined by others. Perhaps you want to leave a job you find unfulfilling, but that job is secure and there is a pandemic. Or, you want to express your creativity through art but your family has always been against that since you were a child.

In all these examples, self-regulation gets interrupted by something in your wider world. The formula is, 'I want to do Y, but I cannot because of X.' This differs from, 'I want to do Y, but I will not because of X.' The first one is self-regulation based on what you should do. It is about doing or not doing because of an external standard. The kind of self-regulation that underpins the paradox of change questions the external standards before bowing to them. It identifies the rules that you have submitted to without any evaluation, that often feel forced upon you.

I am not saying here that you should discard all the external rules of your upbringing, for example. That would be creating another set of problems. I am saying that you owe it to yourself to evaluate the rules you live by and choose the ones you keep. Then, when you have chosen your rules, they become an integral part of who you are and you submit to them as if they were natural impulses. That said, here are four ways you can start accepting who you are:

FOUR WAYS TO ACCEPT YOURSELF

Embrace relaxed awareness

Relaxed awareness is the opposite of being constantly distracted. It is a form of soft consciousness of your pain, feelings, thoughts, self-rating, and judgments. It is a knowing of your existence and the thoughts that are happening in the moment, as well as your emotions and the external stimuli. To practice this, close your eyes for a minute. You will be tempted to push your thoughts away, but do not. Focus instead on your breath and softly notice what you are thinking and feeling in your body. If you see negative emotions and thoughts, that's okay. Only watch them. Do not attempt to make them positive or to do away with them. Your thoughts will resolve themselves. You can practice this every time during your day when you feel like overthinking is about to engulf you.

Welcome the things you notice

As you do the first exercise, you will become aware of things like self-judgments, negative thoughts, fears, and even happy thoughts. You will be tempted to stop your negative feelings, but that is suppression. It is avoidance to negate the negative. The better approach is to invite those thoughts and feelings as if you are having four o'clock tea together. Hug them if you will. They are part of who you are. They are acceptable. If you feel bad about them being there, that's okay. Accept that bad feeling. Give it a hug and comfort it. Let it just be. It is not bad, just an opportunity to learn about who you are. Whenever we run away from the 'bad' feelings, we make our pain worse. So, learn to see the good and the opportunity in those feelings. They are okay.

Notice the self-rating and be grateful

As you start paying attention to your thoughts and feelings, you will notice that you rate yourself. Overthinkers rate themselves against others or against a standard of good or bad at the things they feel they are particularly bad at. This is never useful, but that doesn't mean you let it go. Rather,

notice it and its roots. Once you notice the pain self-rating causes you, you will be happy to release it when the time is right. As you do this, remind yourself every morning of things that you feel grateful for. Be sure to add things about yourself and lessons you have learned from failure. It will temper your self-rating.

Show yourself compassion

As you keep noticing your self-rating and judgments, turn them into compassion. If you are harsh with yourself for failing at work, forgive yourself, the same way you would forgive someone else. Observe your thoughts to understand why it happened. Understanding will make it easier for you to accept your imperfections. You will likely notice guilt and shame attached to your failures – perceived or real. It is impossible to feel good about yourself if you believe you have done wrong (guilt) or if you believe you are wrong as a person (shame). Only forgiveness can lift the heavy burden these emotions lay on you.

You feel guilt when you have transgressed or broken your moral code. It is uncomfortable. It gnaws at you and presents in everything you see around you. If you notice guilt, own what you have done. Be accountable for your actions and the consequences they bring. Go back to the specific situation that makes you feel guilty and re-experience it, this time compassionately, but without denying responsibility. Don't try to justify or excuse yourself. Ask yourself what need you wanted to meet at the time. Then, learn from your mistakes. What would you do better today? If you can make amends or atone for the mistake, then do so. Then, say to yourself 'I forgive myself for doing X. I permit myself to move on with the lessons I have learnt from my mistake.'

GET EMPOWERED

As you observe and accept your inadequacies, commit to learning from all parts of life. Most of the time, we think of our successes as good things and our failures as bad things. Yet, we can see everything as a potential teacher. That way, even the dark parts of who we are become interesting and useful to us. As a rule of thumb, always remember that you are not your emotions. When you experience negative emotions, know that they are separate. They are not you. Watch them without giving them moral charge. Think of them, not as commandments that need to be believed or followed, but as passing objects. They are like a leaf that floats past you, blown by the wind.



THE TAKEAWAY

You cannot deal with your overthinking by minimizing it or refusing to accept that it exists. The surest way to change is to embrace who you are. The more you embrace who you are, the more likely you are to change. You can practice self-acceptance through:

- Practicing relaxed awareness
- Welcoming the things you notice
- Noticing self-rating and being grateful
- Practicing self-compassion

THE PARADOX OF CHOICE - LIMIT YOUR OPTIONS

A few years ago, I needed printouts for a tax form but my printer was out of ink. It was one of those printer/scanner combinations that I bought second-hand at a very low price. But its ink needs regular replacement even though I don't use that printer all too often. On the said day, the simple printing job triggered some options. I could refill the cartridge or buy a new one, or I could throw the old printer away and get a new one. I had more questions about getting the new one – what type would it be? Could I use it to generate some side income? Would it have a scanner like this one? Then, of course, there was the fourth option of finding a cyber to print out the form.

I think I spent one hour thinking about the printer and exploring my options. The truth though is that going to a cyber was probably the most reasonable option then. But you see, I had other options, and because they were there, I wanted to be sure that I had considered everything. So, I ended up wasting a lot of time. I spent more time thinking about my options than doing the actual printing. Sounds ridiculous, right? Yet, in how many situations in life do you get caught up doing the same thing? How many times do you get caught up in the choosing process longer than in the experience or action you are contemplating?

Imagine that you are out of milk so you head out to pick some up. When you arrive at the dairy aisle in the grocery store, you notice that you have dozens of options to choose from. You not only have to make a choice about the brand, you have to choose the percentage of fat you want in your

milk and where the milk will be coming from – oats, almonds, cows, oats, soybeans, etc. Dumbfounded, you stand there wondering what milk you have to choose. The choices are so many that you get overwhelmed. So, you figure that you can just go home to do your research and come back. Of course, you end up overthinking and wasting a lot of time.

This idea is called the paradox of choice. It is a big concern in today's world and makes life worse for the overthinker. Today's world has more options getting accessible and available by the day. According to the paradox, while we want to think that having many options makes it easier for us to choose the one that will make us happy and increase our satisfaction, it actually increases the effort we have to put in the choice and leaves us feeling unsatisfied with what we pick. If you only had to pick between 2% and 1% milk, then it would be simpler to make your choice because you can weigh the advantages against the disadvantages. The more choices you have, the harder it becomes to know what is best. Rather than increasing your freedom to have the things you want, having too many options limits your freedom. As Barry Shwartz put it, it is hard to choose, harder still to choose well, and hardest to choose well in a world with unlimited possibilities.

THE HISTORY OF THE PARADOX OF CHOICE

I'd like to start this section by defining five terms that I will use consistently throughout the next section:

- Choice overload – The tendency to feel overwhelmed when you have too many options.
- Maximizer – Someone always looking for the most optimal outcome of a choice. The opposite of this is a person who only wants to make a good enough decision as long as it meets their criteria.
- Choice architecture – Techniques used to set the context for making choices and to influence certain decisions.
- Second-order choices – Choices following a rule meant to make decision-making simpler.
- Opportunity cost – The benefits you miss by forfeiting a choice.

Barry Schwartz, the man I earlier quoted, popularized this paradox in 2004. By that time, he had studied the intersection between psychology and economics for a long time. He got interested in seeing how choices affect people in the Western world. In his research, he identified a number of choices that were common and available to many people. These choices had to be different from what had been available in the past. He noticed that even though customers had more choices, they were not more satisfied.

One of the things America prides itself with is freedom. Of course, freedom has always been associated with choice and the belief that the more you can choose from, the freer you are. It is easy to see why this has always been the assumption – rather than getting forced to choose between two options, people are free to choose between countless options. This is true throughout society including in large corporations and businesses. They have over time embraced the belief that the more choices they give the customer, the happier the customer will be, and the better business will be.

In his research, Schwartz found that when you have countless options, you become less happy with the choices you make. Rather than making you more satisfied with your decision, getting too many options makes you less likely to believe that you have made the best choice. According to Schwartz, even though freedom matters, there is a fine line between getting the freedom to choose and getting paralyzed because you have too many options. Unconstrained freedom always causes paralysis.

As a society, as we make technological, social, and scientific advances, we have more options available to us than were available to the generations before us. The choice of the kind of milk is just one example of what is happening today. We have become privy to a plethora of choices. There are numerous options for the kind of clothes you could buy, which groceries you need, the kind of car you could drive, the beauty products you could use, the restaurants you can visit, and so forth. On the surface, this looks like a good thing because everyone's tastes are accounted for, but we actually just get overwhelmed. Like I said earlier, it is easy to choose between A and B, but it is harder to judge the value of A when you have options A to Z. Because of this, we experience choice overload and we become unhappier with the choices we are making.

I must mention here that this paradox is not just about economics, even though it was borne of economics. It is an issue that will arise in other areas of your life as you get more and more possibilities. To make things worse, social media and the internet has made it possible to consider all the options we have at our disposal without having to physically visit a store. Some other scientific and technological advances also mean that there are new kinds of jobs that you have to choose from every day. A few years back, the word 'influencer' was not a potential career path. Social media has also revolutionized how we choose life partners. Now there are dating apps that you can get onto and access a global dating pool at your fingertips.

When Schwartz was doing his research, he built up on work that had been done by another scientist about instituting limits to choice and making a good enough choice. Schwartz found that the paradox of choice most affects overthinkers who tend to be maximizers. They are not concerned with making a choice that is good enough, they want to make the best

choice. When they have many available options, overthinkers find it harder to know what is best, and are left with a lot of regret after they eventually make a choice. Besides, when they have more options, they have higher opportunity costs which add to their unhappiness.

Schwartz went on to suggest that the way out of this conundrum is to introduce limits. He suggested that overthinkers set up rules if they wanted to improve their well-being and function optimally. As far as he was concerned, a proper balance of limitations means a happier life. Many studies have gone on to support the findings of Schwartz's study, but it is worth mentioning that there are a few that have conflicting evidence. One of them suggests that people feel better about an option when they have three choices rather than two. Another criticism of the paradox is that the scientific evidence is still getting collected. One critic asked how Starbucks is so popular even though it has a menu with hundreds of choices. Then there is the suggestion from other quarters that people never want to choose an attractive option if it is the only option. They need something to compare it with.

True, some of the controversial views may need exploring, but the research supporting the paradox of choice is overwhelming. If you are an overthinker, you recognize the value in limiting your options. It stops you from having too much fodder in your mind that you live there. Here are four ways to limit your options:

SIX WAYS TO LIMIT YOUR CHOICES

Set a schedule for every day

Having a daily schedule will help you reduce the number of choices you have to make every day and the likelihood that you will overthink. Wake up at the same time each day, take breakfast around the same time. Schedule your workouts as well. It may sound monotonous and boring but the more you do these things, the more automated they will become. A schedule will help you maintain habits, so that you never have to forget working out ever again, for example. Besides, your mind will no longer have the freedom to wonder about other things that seem more important.

If it is difficult to schedule every hour in your day, you can begin by simply structuring it. If you are an early bird, then you can do most of your important tasks in the morning. If you are a night owl, then you can plan around that. The thing about structuring your day is finding what works best for you and grouping tasks by the time of day, but still getting the benefits of a schedule.

1. Mornings – You can use your mornings to do the things you need to do to leave the house. Plan early tasks for the morning such that then, you can feed and walk your pets, unload dishes from the dishwasher, put dinner on the cooker, and so forth. After you are done with the morning rush, then do the tasks that require a lot of mental energy. The typical advice is to ‘eat the frog.’ What this means is that you do the things that you least want to do first. That way, you can go about your day without them looming over you and causing anxiety.
2. Midday – The middle of the day may be tricky to plan for because most of the time, your energy levels are unpredictable. Most likely, the coffee you took in the morning is no longer in the system. You are likely starting to feel hungry. Still, you can use this time well. Since it is primed to be slow, you can do routine tasks that do not demand a lot of concentration. Use that time to set appointments,

run errands and answer emails. If you are at home during the day, then you can use this time to do routine cleaning, scrub bathrooms, and load up the dishwasher.

3. Evening – Whatever you plan for your evenings, make sure you set aside time for preparing for the next day. Pack your lunches, decide what you will wear and lay out your outfits, clean out the rooms where stuff has piled up, like the kitchen, and so forth.

Buy similar outfits in different colors

If you think about it, you probably spend a lot of time overthinking because of simple choices like what to wear. But what if you picked a style that works for you and you bought similar outfits but in different colors? It has worked for President Obama – the man had only two types of suits. It also worked for Steve Jobs, who became known for his signature outfit – a black turtleneck and jeans. Even Mark Zuckerberg has different colors of the same hoodie. And what is common about these people? They make a lot of important decisions every day so they cannot afford to waste their energy on small choices like what to put on.

Create a meal plan

When you get home from work after a long day, feeling hungry and tired, you do not want to spend another 30 minutes trying to decide what to eat. Besides, research shows that because of fatigue, you are more likely to eat an unhealthy diet, which of course, will worsen overthinking. Avoid going down this road by planning your meals ahead of time. You can even meal prep at the beginning of the week so that you have little work to do within the week.

Make your small decisions automated

There are other small choices that you can automate to make your life easier and happier. For example, if you order goods from Amazon, the site has a subscription package where you can automatically ship your purchases. You can also use virtual assistant apps to make some decisions for you, like where you should eat.

Allow for serendipity

Allowing for serendipity is leaving room for the world to surprise you. It is pre-determining that you will not make every choice there is to make – you can just let life happen. It is not the same as giving up what you want to allow whatever happens to happen, and it is not quitting. Serendipity is a form of coincidence that happens for a reason. Some people call it fate. Allowing for serendipity is accounting for the things you cannot control when you meet such coincidences. That way, you are happier watching them unfold without feeling anything. The good news is that serendipity always brings good challenges and good causes.

Stick with your choices

Having many available options has a way of making us feel discontent with the choices we have made. No wonder we have a hard time committing to a partner or keep changing jobs. To deal with the paradox of choice, you can finalize your decisions. Decide beforehand that you will stick with your choice. As you stick with things, you will notice your passion for them growing.

GET EMPOWERED

Once you have done this, you only have the big decisions to contend with. With those too, you can limit your options. Always remember that you have a choice. Big decisions can get overwhelming for the overthinker. They can cause you to start feeling victimized or helpless. When this happens, remember that you are making an unconscious choice – make it conscious. If you are not happy with your job, for example, you are choosing security over your happiness. Recognize that even if you did not make it consciously, it is still a choice and you can change it.

It is important that you always be on the lookout and acknowledge when fear starts taking the lead. The ego is protective and will always want control. It wants to doubt, argue, vacillate, and most of all, avoid feeling uncertain at all costs. It is always terrified. If you are not aware of the decisions you make based on fear, you will always choose things at the expense of your life purpose, health, financial potential, and happiness. Rather than making your decision in fear, you can surrender it to the divine – let your soul make the choice. Your ego will likely fight it, but that's okay. Make the heart-felt choice.

While at it, be sure to notice whatever hurts. As a rule of thumb, if something hurts, there is a message it is trying to send to you that can help you make your choice. For example, if you are trying to see whether you should quit your job, your emotional pain means something. It will seem like the rational thing to do is worry about your bills, but in the end, those things are less important when there is pain violating the integrity of your soul. It is time to make a change if the pain you feel in a situation exceeds your fear of the unknown.



THE TAKEAWAY

Life unfolds in a series of choices. We make them moment by moment and they range from the mundane (what to eat, wear or the route to take to work) to the significant life-changing choices like switching careers and getting married. It is not like we make one choice and then that's it. Something else always comes up – more choices. Choice is freedom. It allows us to fulfill our desires and dreams and to express our uniqueness. In some parts of the world, choice is scarce. Social, economic, and political conditions curtail people's ability to choose. In the west though, we have many choices, but there is a paradox that could make choice a curse – the more options we have, the more stress we have and the less satisfaction we feel. We drown in the details and waste time overthinking options. Freedom of choice becomes our emotional and mental prison. The antidote is limiting your choices by:

- Creating a daily schedule
- Buying similar outfits in different colors
- Using a meal plan
- Automating small decisions
- Allowing for serendipity
- Sticking with the choices made

AFTERWORD

Thoughts are powerful. They can shape reality. As one person says, whatever you consistently hold in your mind will become your life experience. This is something the most successful people in the world understand. The only thing that sets them apart is that they have learned to use their thoughts to achieve success. But if they have done it, that is good news for the overthinker because it means that you too can turn things around. Research shows that about 73% of people between 25 and 35 years old overthink. The number is at 52% for those over 45. So, you are not alone and you were not born an overthinker.

As I have shown in this book, overthinking is a result of your human experience. It is a pattern of behavior that you picked up, which probably served you at some point but is no longer useful. Fortunately, this pattern can be unlearned. With decisive action and the techniques provided in this book, you can change your mindset and live a calmer, more peaceful, and happier life.

The classic definition of overthinking is that you think too much about something for too long. It is human to think through situations and evaluate decisions, but the overthinker does more than that. They are unable to get out of their own head, something which causes them stress and worry. Some overthinkers worry about the future and make horrible predictions about events that are yet to happen. Others ruminate about the past, punishing themselves about things that could have or should have

happened. They fret over what others think about them or allow their self-talk to roam wild.

Whichever camp you fall into, you know that overthinking causes problems. Replaying different causes in your mind can paralyze you from taking action. You become afraid that your action will be the wrong one. Overthinking causes you sleepless nights and joyless days because your brain just won't shut up. So, in this book, you have hopefully found assurance that you are not alone, that your plight is understood. But more importantly, you understand more about why you overthink and have used some of the exercises to get to your root cause.

Even though overthinking can seem beneficial, I have provided you with reasons why it is counterproductive. I have helped you recognize the difference between overthinking and problem solving. You now know that overthinking is harmful to you. Within the chapters of this book, I have helped you to overcome overthinking by identifying and dealing with destructive patterns of thought, limiting your options, focusing your attention, embracing imperfection, dealing with grief, among others. Now, you know how to take control of the story you tell yourself and the one you inhabit. The question is, will you do it? Will you commit to kicking this habit for good? The ball is in your court. I wish you all the best!

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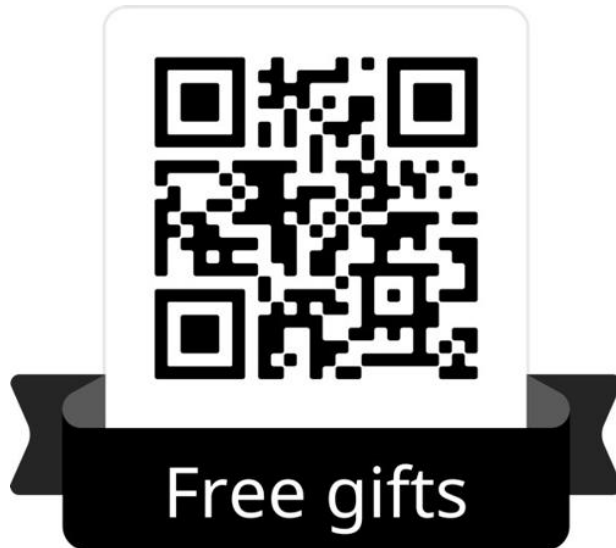
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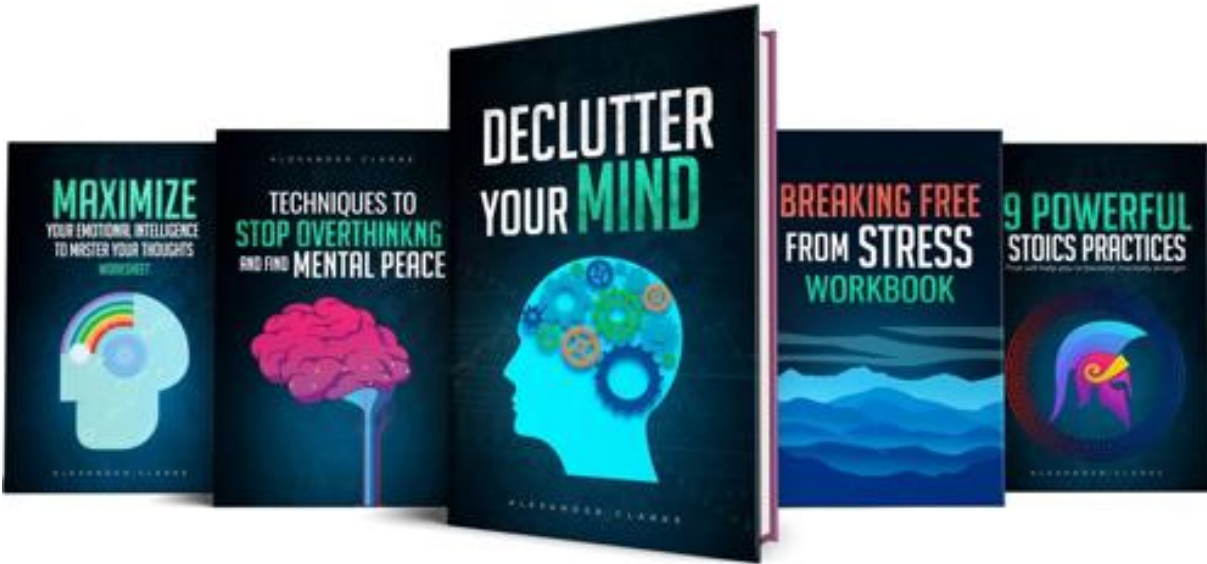
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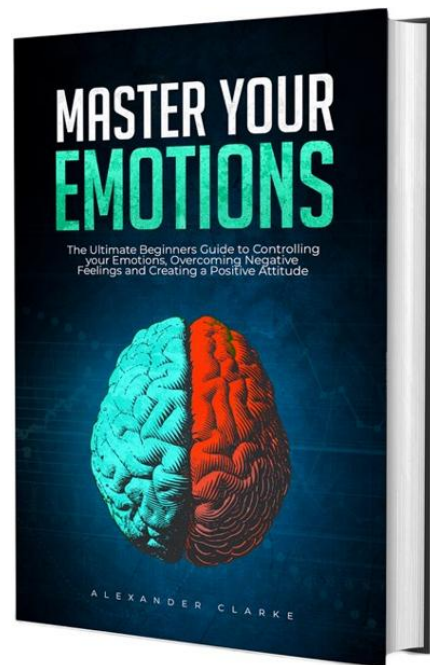


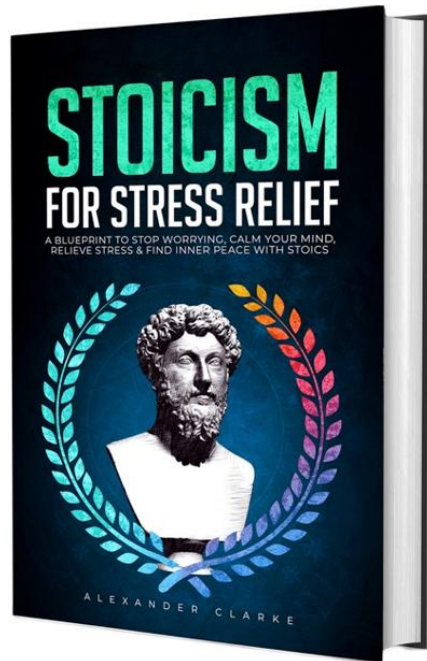
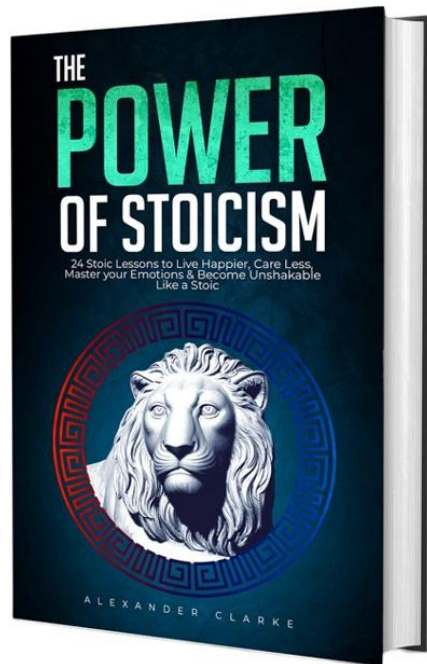
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