

DON'T OVERTHINK



NEUROPSYCHE
NETWORK

WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME?

Learn how to stop ruminating – and enjoy life more.

“ Have you ever found yourself lying awake at 3:00 a.m., replaying a casual comment from a colleague or agonizing over a minor decision? In today's complex world, our brains often go into overdrive, turning molehills into mountains.

“Don't Overthink It” dives deep into the labyrinth of our minds, exploring why we spiral into convoluted negative thoughts and how they complicate our lives.

This Neuropsyché short isn't just about diagnosing the problem, however – it also offers a roadmap to clarity for everyone who feels tangled in their thoughts and yearns for simpler, more joyous moments.



OVERTHINKING IS ABOUT SWEATING THE SMALL STUFF – AND MISALLOCATING LIMITED COGNITIVE RESOURCES

Careful and deep thinking is important. Major life choices are a case in point. It's worth dwelling on decisions about your career, whether to end a relationship, or move to another country. This Neuropsyché short isn't about these kinds of decisions, or the thinking required to solve complex problems.

What we'll be looking at is overthinking. Let's start, then, with a definition.

Overthinking happens when we use an excessive amount of mental energy on relatively insignificant matters. When we do this, we misallocate our cognitive resources. Rather than using our limited brain power to address important issues, we waste it on trivial questions.

Overthinking can manifest in several ways. Take ruminating. That's what's happening when you lie awake at night replaying a minor episode from the day, like a thoughtless comment from a colleague. Or when you obsess over small issues, like contemplating for hours whether to exchange a clothing item or thinking about minor home improvements that need doing. These kinds of unimportant thoughts occupy an outsized amount of brain space.

Then there's indecision – the constant self-doubt about everyday choices. Were those flowers worth the cost? Will people think you're rude if you turn down that dinner invitation next week? As we'll see, such indecision comes from a lack of guiding values or clear perspectives.

All forms of overthinking share common traits – they're recurrent, detrimental, and futile. This constant mental labor achieves nothing and drains your energy. It complicates life, strains relationships, and undermines mental health.

There's also a considerable opportunity cost to overthinking. Mental energy is finite. Every moment you spend overthinking detracts from time you could have spent on something constructive. How you spend your days defines your life; spending those days overthinking is a wasted opportunity to live a better, more fulfilling life.

Of course, no one chooses this way of being. It's a trap, not a choice. We all desire more for ourselves, aiming for contentment rather than uncertainty. Yet, the escape seems elusive.

Our goal in this Neuropsyché short is to pave the way for a life free from overthinking. True contentment, Anne Bogel argues, arises from thoughtful living: it's about focusing on what really matters. Our aim, then, is to equip you with strategies to combat decision fatigue, reduce overwhelming feelings, and infuse tranquility and happiness into daily living. With these tools, you'll learn to effectively allocate your time and ensure that your moments and days are well-spent and well-lived.



PERFECTIONISM CAN LEAD TO ANALYSIS PARALYSIS

Recognition is the first step to change. In other words, if you want to combat overthinking, it's crucial to recognize when you're doing it. That means observing patterns and being mindful of your actions. One of the telltale signs of overthinking to look out for is analysis paralysis.

So what's that, exactly? Well, it's when you're stuck in a cycle of constant thought that never reaches a conclusion. The core issue here isn't the decision you need to make but your mental approach toward it. The result? Indecision, stalling, and a constant revisiting of the same information. This drains your mental energy, amplifies stress, and hampers your ability to make sound decisions in the future. After all, if you don't trust yourself to get the small stuff right, how can you trust yourself to manage the big stuff?

Breaking out of the analysis paralysis trap starts with a reality check. Let's break that down.

One of the most common causes of overthinking is the idea that there's a single "right" answer to problems. This is a form of perfectionism, which is an unrealistic idealization of the world. Perfect solutions are a myth; most problems have not one but multiple good solutions.

If you believe in a single correct solution, you're going to spend lots of time gathering more and more data. If there are many ways of solving a problem, by contrast, you're going to be more interested in moving forward and seeing if solutions actually work. Put differently, you'll see those potential solutions as hypotheses that need to be tested. There are lots of ways of propelling yourself toward taking action – you can set yourself a deadline, for example, or create a list, seek a friend's perspective, or even delegate the choice to someone else.

The key is to give yourself permission to falter. When you allow yourself to experience failures, you loosen the stranglehold of "absolute perfection" over your decision-making. Best of all, you begin to see that failures aren't endpoints – they're rich learning experiences.

Mistakes often offer more valuable insights than a smooth-sailing journey. If you're constantly on guard, preventing errors at all costs, you rob yourself of potent lessons. Yet, for many, the word "failure" can be a daunting one. But think back to what we just said about solutions being hypotheses. Instead of viewing solutions that don't work as defeats, envision them as data in the experiment that is your life. There are no heavy expectations in experiments; an experiment focuses on results, not victories. Every outcome is a step forward.



IDENTIFYING YOUR VALUES CAN SIMPLIFY YOUR DECISION-MAKING

We're bombarded with thousands of decisions every day. Some are big, like which career path to take; the majority are much smaller, like what to have for dinner. Amidst this barrage, it's easy to get lost in overthinking. The question is, how can you make these kinds of decisions with greater clarity? It's time to talk about values-driven decision-making.

Lots of folks who are great decision-makers aren't simply lucky or intuitive – they're guided by values. They make choices based on who they are and what matters to them. The lesson here is this: recognizing and naming your values can act as a beacon in a sea of daily decisions.

Consider the example of choosing a school for your child, or, more prosaically, which grocery store you'll be using for your weekly shop. If you deeply value community and neighborhood ties, the answer is obvious: choose the school or store that's closest to where you live and reduce the amount of time you spend in your car. That means more chances to interact with neighbors and less commuting. This is how values can demystify decision-making.

Values don't just guide choices – they also shape thoughts and interests. If you value being informed, for instance, you'll engage with community news and have regular conversations about local events. In essence, our actions and interests should mirror our core beliefs.

But here's the catch. Sometimes there's a mismatch between what we say we value and what we actually do. Claiming to cherish family time but always working late, or expressing the importance of reading but never picking up a book are signs of misaligned values. The solution? Periodic self-reflection. Ask yourself, "Do my actions reflect my stated values?" This "fact-check" can unveil discrepancies.

To see how this works in practice, take the case of Anne Bogel's uncle, a physician who valued health both professionally and personally but who was also a smoker. One day, his secretary surprised him by saying she'd recognized him before he'd even opened the door to his practice. How? By his cough. It was a moment of reckoning.

Recognizing the incongruence between his perceived value and the habit of smoking, he quit immediately. His long-held values, properly identified, gave him the strength to change.

So here's the takeaway: if you want to improve your decision-making, start by identifying your values. If you're having trouble doing that, you can reflect on where you invest your time, money, and energy. These investments often reveal unconscious values. If you recognize and like what you see, amplify those values. If you don't, it might be time to redefine and adopt new values that resonate with you.

Some values like honesty, kindness, and reliability are widely accepted. However, unique values like a love for adventure, prioritizing humor, or valuing a good night's sleep are just as valid. Remember, your values don't have to be universally "right" – just right for you. Once you identify your values and start living by them, overthinking starts to fade away.

YOU CAN'T CONTROL EVERY ASPECT OF YOUR LIFE, BUT YOU CAN CONTROL YOUR RESPONSES

You've heard the saying, "You are what you eat." It's the same with thinking: we are all the sum of the thoughts whirring through our minds. The way we think molds our lives; it defines how we interact with the world, how we perceive it, and how we behave.

That's because thoughts and emotions are inseparable. While events around us are often beyond our control, our reactions – which are driven by our thoughts – shape our feelings and actions. Put simply, positive thinking yields positivity in emotions – and thus actions. Conversely, dwelling on the negative can lead us into a vortex of overthinking.

The good news is that you have the power to choose your thoughts. This isn't easy, of course, but it is possible. Think of your mind as a garden. You are the gardener and it's your job to tend to that garden diligently, removing weeds and ensuring only the best seeds take root.

Start by observing your mental patterns. What occupies your thoughts? Is there a tendency to focus on the negative? Do you habitually overthink certain topics? Listen to your internal dialogue. If you're perpetually pessimistic, remember that nobody enjoys persistent negativity, not even when it's just you and your thoughts. When you spot signs of negative thinking, actively search for and acknowledge the good in every situation.

This proactive approach can divert your mind from rumination. For example, when you're confronted with a daunting task, remind yourself of the adage, "Hard work leads to success." Such positive affirmations can steer you away from negative spirals and encourage perseverance.

Gratitude is another powerful antidote to overthinking. Regularly counting your blessings shifts your focus from what's lacking to the abundance in your life. The upshot? An uplifted mood and less room for negative rumination. A simple way of doing this is to set a reminder on your phone each day; when it buzzes, take a minute to think about one thing you're grateful for. Another option to embed this practice in your daily life is to keep a gratitude journal.

Cultivating empathy also helps to refocus your perspective. When faced with an annoying situation, like an inconsiderate driver, don't jump to negative conclusions. Instead, consider an empathetic explanation – maybe they're rushing to the hospital. This mindset reduces negative responses, and supports an attitude of understanding and patience. You might not have control over external events, but the meanings you make from them are in your hands.



WHEN YOU STOP OVERTHINKING, YOU OPEN YOURSELF UP TO LIFE'S SMALL JOYS

In one of her most popular newspaper columns, the American humorist Erma Bombeck wrote that if she had her life to live over, she would “have eaten popcorn in the ‘good’ living room” and “burnt the pink candle that was sculptured like a rose before it melted in storage.”

Bombeck wrote those words in 1979, but they still resonate. There’s an abundance of small and profoundly good things in our lives — and just as many moments in which we pass up the opportunity to savor them because we’re overthinking things.

The point, here, is that a joyful life doesn’t require grand gestures and extravagant luxuries. Often, it’s small, inexpensive pleasures like Bombeck’s pink rose candle that fill us with happiness.

Reducing overthinking isn’t just about eradicating negative thought patterns and bad habits – it’s also about embracing joy. Anne Bogel, for example, spent many years denying herself a simple pleasure: keeping a bouquet of flowers on the countertop in her kitchen. Those bouquets weren’t expensive – a bunch of her favorite tulips cost less than five dollars. But she over-thought it. Did she need the flowers? No, not really. So she left the tulips in the store and passed up one of the things that makes her happy.

While little treats can seem inconsequential or even frivolous, their absence can lead to a mentality of scarcity rather than abundance. Such pleasures shouldn’t be viewed as extravagances, but as affirmations of the beauty in everyday life. In other words: treat yourself!

What qualifies as a treat? It’s that little extra – a delightful deviation from the ordinary. It doesn’t need to be pricey, either – all that matters is that it resonates with you. Some people cherish lavender baths in the evening; for others, it’s a magazine subscription or going to the cinema with a friend. Treats are individual. Creating habits around these treats can be liberating and automate our joy, negating the compulsion to overthink and self-debate about such pleasures. Instead of weighing up the pros and cons of buying those flowers at the store, imagine having a preset philosophy that encourages you to enjoy without guilt. Having these ready-made decisions allows you to seize the moment, be it the rich taste of dark chocolate after dinner or a restorative Saturday morning hike. Nowadays, Bogel adds a bouquet of fresh flowers to her cart every time she’s at the store. That eliminates the mental fatigue of decision-making and ensures that every shopping trip ends with a touch of joy.

So, what constitutes simple abundance for you? Reflect on the moments you might be denying yourself out of misplaced guilt. It’s essential to challenge that internal voice which whispers, “I don’t deserve this.” Instead, reframe your perspective. Remember that abundance isn’t always tied to a price tag. It might be an undisturbed hour with a gripping novel, a peaceful tea break on your porch, or a moment of stillness admiring nature’s beauty.

There are so many opportunities for joy. The real gift lies in allowing yourself to relish these pockets of happiness, without overthinking or waiting for a grand occasion. After all, in the grand tapestry of life, these simple pleasures often weave the most vibrant patterns.



FINAL

SUMMARY

“Overthinking wastes cognitive resources, puts unnecessary strain on us, and complicates life. It often results from unclear values, leading to indecision.

Overcoming this means recognizing when we're overthinking and understanding that multiple solutions exist for every problem. To make better decisions, act according to your core values, and embrace potential failure, since you can always learn from it. Breaking the cycle of overthinking involves using positive affirmations, and practicing gratitude and empathy.

True contentment comes from enjoying life's simple pleasures rather than denying them as a result of analysis paralysis. Adopting habits that cherish these pleasures combats mental fatigue and promotes a life of simple abundance.

