

The Trap of Overthinking

WRITER
JASON W
BIRKEVOLD
LIEM

Overthinking is like getting bogged down in the mud of your mind explains Jason Liem

We all overthink. The presentation you have to give to the department leaders on Monday. The argument you had with a colleague last week. Missing your son's recital. Being late for your daughter's big game and missing her scoring the winning goal. Things you should have said or shouldn't have.

Most overthinking is relatively harmless. Eventually, something draws our focus and our thinking shifts. But at other times it can be debilitating. A person finds the entrance to a thought loop but is unable to find the exit. Their distress heightens as they go around and around without a destination.

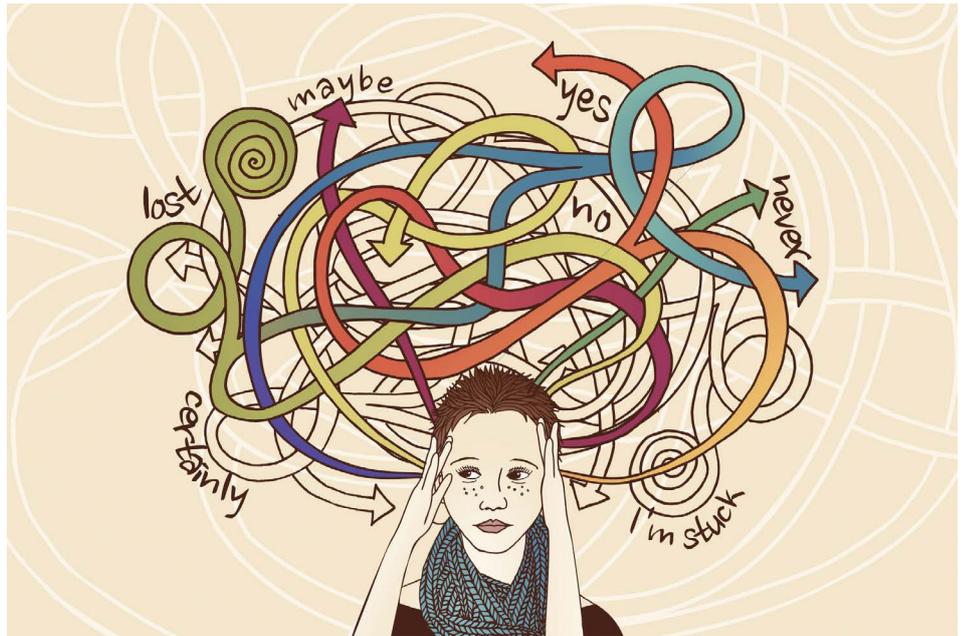
This overthinking is also called rumination and is a dominant symptom of both anxiety and depression. The person plagued with anxious thoughts repeatedly plays out every permutation of how a future event will end in disaster. The depressed thinker is haunted by regrets of actions and inactions of their past. In both cases, people get stuck on what they can't control and influence.

What is Rumination?

One working thought as to why humans ruminate is that it meant our ancestors could learn from unfortunate events to avoid similar future situations. For our ancestors rumination was not a mental handicap as it is for modern humans. They didn't have the luxury of time that we have today. Life demanded that they moved on to gather food, to hunt and to take care of the next immediate need.

Ruminating is the brain's way of trying to resolve a problem. The brain repeatedly approaches the problem without any resolution. It gets fixated on an ineffective approach, and it only gets worse as the rumination intensifies. Ruminating is the inability to shift perspective to see a problem from a different angle.

Ruminating is about getting stuck in a negative thinking spiral while wallowing in negative emotions. Unfortunately, it takes a toll on us psychologically as well as physiologically.



When we get stuck in a loop of negative overthinking, we put ourselves into a state of physical and emotional stress.

Habit Forming

Thinking about something over and over is habit forming, as is doing anything repeatedly. Over time we become more skilled at it to the point where we can execute without any conscious effort. This is wonderful if our thoughts are constructive and optimistic in nature. Unfortunately, rumination is detrimental to our well-being if left unchecked.

Rumination changes the structure of the brain. Think of it in this way: the first time you cut across a field of long grass you can look back and see your path through the bent and broken straws. The next time you walk the same path, the trail becomes even more pronounced.

Every time we ruminate, we create a *neural trail* in our brains. It becomes easier for us to slip into overthinking and to put ourselves into a distressed state. The more we overthink the harder it becomes for us to stop ourselves from cycling into rumination.

Countering Rumination

The trick is to actually catch ourselves in the act. Countering rumination means we must be present with our thoughts. Only then can we launch initiatives to stop overthinking in its tracks.

Let me share with you some actions that have been helpful for many of my clients.

Action One

Change a ruminating thought into a question that can be answered or as a problem that can be solved. For example, change 'I can't believe I said something so foolish!' to "What can I say differently the next time the situation comes up?"

Sometimes my clients have found it difficult to reshape a problem statement into the form of a question in their minds. One helpful way is to write down the statement and then the reworded question beside it.

Examples:

"I can't believe this happened!" to "What can I do to prevent it from happening again?"

"I don't have good friends!" to "What steps could I take to deepen the friendships I have and find new ones?"

"I'm going to mess up the big presentation next week!" to "What parts of the presentation am I confident about? What parts do I know well?"

Action Two

Take notice when you feel things are good. It is in these moments when thinking tends to be clear and constructive. You might feel confident, or be certain of yourself, or you're thinking with clarity. Stay in the moment and investigate.

Do your future self a favour and write yourself a note of encouragement. The content of the letter should include the reasons why you feel in such a positive state. What is going on? What is the nature of your thoughts? What are you focusing on that is making you feel confident? Why are you feeling a sense of clarity? What is feeding your sense of certainty?

Another practical tip is to pen the letter as if you were writing to a close friend. This third-person perspective helps us to take a more objective stance.

Action Three

Amorphous thoughts float about in our heads altering from one form into another. Their very nature makes them hard to get a handle on. This is why I think the action of journaling is extremely helpful.

Writing our thoughts down is cathartic. The act of capturing abstract thoughts and articulating them into concrete words stops rumination in its tracks. Toxic thoughts no longer have the chance to slink away and hide in the dark recesses of our minds. They are captured as pixels on a screen or ink scratches on paper.

Journaling allows us to be present with our thoughts by helping us to shift from a subjective perspective to an objective one. From the advantage point of the objective perspective it is much easier to expose the nature of our dysfunctional thinking.

Action Four

I live in the northern hemisphere, where the weather is constantly changing and shifting. One moment it can be overcast. The next moment the clouds have broken up and sunlight is filtering through. The interior of our heads is no different. We each have our own internal weather system.

Sometimes your internal weather is going to feel grey and overcast, especially if you are caught up in ruminative thoughts. Rainy weather can only last as long as the pattern of weather that sustains it. Once the pattern disappears so will the rain. This also applies to our own internal weather. Once a thought pattern dissipates so does its associated emotions and behaviours.

Action three is about shifting patterns of thinking. For me, it doesn't always help to think about something else. Sometimes I need help.

I find that the fastest and easiest way is to distract myself by playing a game or testing my cognitive skills on a brain-training app. These apps capture my attention. I become so occupied in the game or brain-challenge that I forget to ruminate. After a few minutes I've noticed my internal weather pattern has changed for the better.

Action Five

The heart pumps blood. The lungs pump oxygen. The brain pumps survival. Ruminating thoughts are all about survival. These thoughts put the brain into survival lock-down and the body's fight/flight response into action.

As a result, the bloodstream fills with adrenaline and cortisol. In a sense, these hormones create a *virtual reality* where you feel danger is lurking around the corner.

In the West, there is rarely any real danger, but rather a perceived danger. That is, a threat we believe to exist even though it doesn't. Herein lies the problem. The brain does not make this fine distinction between the two dangers and consequently sets us on edge.

Action five is about gaining perspective. Is there an actual life-threatening danger? Probably not.

First, remind yourself of the brain's survival programming. This means you don't have to believe every thought your brain generates.

Second, the negative feelings you are experiencing are due to the stress hormones swimming through your bloodstream. They heighten the sense of danger even when there is no danger present.

Third is physical exercise. It is the ultimate way of dealing with the psychological and physiological effects of rumination. Exercise significantly speeds the purging of stress hormones from your body. Go for a walk, a run, a swim, a bike ride or anything else that gets your heart rate up. You'll feel better for it.

Action Six

There are going to be times where the first five cognitive tools may not be enough to take on the power of ruminating thoughts. Sometimes we will feel the need to get it off our chest and talk to a trusted friend, colleague or family member.

At other times, we feel that friends and family members are too close. This is when it might be a good idea to find a professional who will have the appropriate distance. That professional could be a coach or sparring partner. Perhaps it's a therapist or psychologist.

Whoever we choose, talking to someone is the best tool I know and that I highly recommend.

Summary

I subscribe to the idea that we are defined by our actions and not by our thinking.

Overthinking is about getting bogged down in the mud. Action is about gaining traction and moving forward. Execute some of the above actions. You might actually surprise yourself how skilled you are at disarming the trap of overthinking.

about the author



Jason W Birkevold Liem helps people to think about their thinking so they are better at managing themselves, others and situations. He achieves this through an informative and engaging process that educates people about the brain, cognitive psychology and interpersonal communication. As a result, clients are better able to face their professional and private challenges with more confidence, certainty and clarity. Through his company, MINDtalk, he designs and delivers brain-based leadership and personal resilience programs to individuals and to teams. Learn more at www.MINDtalk.no.

