

How to Stop Overthinking

A practical guide for anxious minds

Overthinking is often an attempt to gain certainty, prevent mistakes, reduce anxiety, or feel more prepared. The problem is that the brain can become trapped in loops of analyzing, predicting, replaying, and questioning without ever reaching a satisfying conclusion.

The goal is not to “turn your brain off.” The goal is to learn when thinking is helpful — and when it is keeping you stuck.

Common Signs of Overthinking

- Replaying conversations repeatedly
- Constantly analyzing decisions
- “What if...” thinking
- Difficulty letting things go
- Seeking reassurance from others
- Mentally reviewing future scenarios
- Trouble falling asleep because the mind will not slow down
- Feeling mentally exhausted but still unable to stop thinking

Why Overthinking Happens

Overthinking is usually driven by anxiety, uncertainty, perfectionism, or fear of making the wrong choice.

It often creates the illusion of problem-solving, but many forms of overthinking actually increase anxiety instead of resolving it.

The brain temporarily feels more prepared, more in control, and safer — but the long-term result is often increased anxiety, indecision, mental fatigue, avoidance, and less trust in yourself.

Ask Yourself

“Is this problem-solving or mental spinning?”

Helpful problem-solving usually:

- Leads to action
- Has a clear endpoint
- Produces useful information

Overthinking usually:

- Repeats the same thoughts
- Searches for certainty
- Increases anxiety
- Leads nowhere

Five Ways to Interrupt Overthinking

1. Name It

Instead of automatically entering the spiral, pause and notice: *“My brain is overworking right now.”* Labeling the process creates distance from it.

2. Shift From Certainty to Tolerance

Many anxious minds search for guarantees. Try asking: *“Can I tolerate some uncertainty here?”* Mental health improves when we build flexibility rather than perfect certainty.

3. Move Toward Action

Overthinking often keeps people mentally busy while physically stuck. Ask: *“What small action would actually help right now?”* Even small movement can interrupt mental loops.

4. Limit Reassurance Seeking

Repeatedly asking others for reassurance may calm anxiety temporarily, but often strengthens the cycle over time.

5. Reconnect With the Present

Overthinking pulls attention into imagined futures and replayed pasts. Grounding strategies such as movement, breathing slowly, stepping outside, or focusing on one task at a time can help bring attention back to the present moment.

A More Helpful Goal

The goal is not:

“Never have anxious thoughts again.”

The goal is:

“Learn to respond differently when anxious thoughts show up.”

You do not need to solve every thought in order to move forward with your life.

Final Reminder

An overactive mind is often trying to protect you — not harm you.

But protection strategies that rely on constant mental analysis can eventually increase fear and exhaustion.

Learning when to step out of the thinking loop is a skill that can be practiced over time.

Cheryl F. Smith, PhD
Licensed Clinical Psychologist