

FREE FIRST CHAPTER

HOW TO STOP OVERTHINKING EVERYTHING YOU DO

Anatomy Of Overthinking

How To Eliminate Negative Thinking To Find Inner Peace, Develop Mental Contentment, And Stay Calm In The Face Of Chaos — Chapter One. About a 15-minute read.

Your mind is your worst enemy.

Or at least that's how it feels when you find yourself spiraling down into overthinking.

How did you end up like this? Why does everything feel so complicated? Every answer spawns dozens of new questions, and every thought sparks a new mental dilemma.

It's like falling into a pit with quicksand. The more you struggle to get free, the deeper you sink into rumination until...

It's 3 a.m., and you can't fall asleep. You're going over the 100th alternative way in which you could've answered an important message ten years ago. Your mind feels like a broken record, stuck on repeat.

Or maybe until you notice you've been rehearsing a simple phone call for a whole hour. Or rewriting an email over and over again, even though nothing major is at stake. Why do these minor tasks feel so mentally taxing?

Or until your relationships feel like navigating through a thick fog. At night. Blindfolded. Nothing is what it seems, and potential disasters lurk around every corner. Any phrase from a friend or relative is enough to blast you into pointless overthinking for a few hours. Sometimes days, if you're unlucky.

That's tough.

But it doesn't have to be this way.

Just like you can train your muscles, you can also train your mind. There are proven strategies and techniques that can effectively reduce overthinking. Sometimes, they're enough to overcome it for good.

Imagine how much better your life can get if you adopt a healthier mindset.

A mindset without worrying about the future or endlessly going over your past.

Without double-checking your decisions to make sure everything is perfect every single time.

Without being paralyzed by the feeling that any of your actions can turn into a disaster.

Without fearing the new, the unknown, the uncertain. Without thinking too much about it.

If you want to get to the root of the issue, understand the phenomenon of overthinking at its core, and master a powerful arsenal of techniques for healthier thinking patterns, this book is the perfect place to start.

Together, we will explore the nature of overthinking and the many forms that it can take. We'll go over the common causes, patterns, adverse effects—and then dive deep into the most effective strategies against persistent thoughts and worries.

The best part? On every step of this journey, we will cover real-life scenarios and examples to put these strategies and techniques to good use. Ultimately, the goal of this book is to give you a mental toolbox of techniques to use whenever you feel that you're slipping into overthinking.

Sometimes this will be a work-related issue, like when you find yourself struggling with an important task. In other cases, the overthinking could be related to a bumpy period in your relationship with someone. Every situation is unique, and what works in some instances

may be less effective in other scenarios. That's why mastering a range of mental techniques is so important. Instead of having a single cookie-cutter response, you'll be able to pick the most suitable strategy for any given challenge.

Some of these techniques include thought restructuring, cognitive defusion, healthy coping mechanisms, effective goal-setting, and many others. Oh, don't worry if all this sounds a little overwhelming. We'll go through everything bit by bit, with plenty of stories and examples along the way. This won't be just a learning experience, but an exciting journey through the beautiful intricacies of the human mind. Your mind.

My name is Ivan Kokhno, and I'll be your guide on this adventure. At this point, you may be wondering, why me?

Here's my story.

I used to be an anesthesiologist. An extremely anxious anesthesiologist. I was prone to overthinking all the time, endlessly worrying about every single decision at work. I know, I know, those are terrible traits for a doctor working in the fast-paced environment of an intensive care unit. The pressure and stress were too high for me to live with, so I switched careers to writing. I hoped I would find some peace of mind in this meditative line of work. After all, what's there to worry and overthink about when you're writing stories, books, or marketing texts?

Well, tough luck. The anxiety and overthinking didn't go anywhere. I brought them with me from the hospital ward straight to my office desk.

Before, I was overthinking treatment strategies and stressing over unstable patients. Later, I was overthinking word choices and stressing over deadlines for writing projects. This has finally made me realize that my problem ran deeper. I reached out for help. Soon enough, I was diagnosed with generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) and embarked on cognitive behavioral therapy. Over the years that followed, I practiced all the techniques that will be mentioned in this book.

To say that they brought me relief would be a massive understatement.

They changed my life and helped me form a more stable mindset. Of course, I still overthink from time to time. The difference is that now I know how to deal with this process, using different techniques to calm my mind, set better goals, and act instead of think for hours on end, avoiding the final decision. In this book, I want to share some of my favorite techniques with you. I hope they will bring you as much relief as they once brought me.

But first, a quick warning...

This book is a guide. It can show you proven paths to better thinking, but it can't walk these paths for you. You will have to put in the time, patience, and diligent work to reap the results that you want. Just like with any other skill, consciously practicing the techniques mentioned in this book is essential to master them. Trust the process, don't rush it, and stay consistent.

Go one step at a time until you reach your destination: a mind with less overthinking, and much more peace.

Are you ready to take the first step?

Keep reading. Our adventure starts now.

Ivan Kokhno

Anatomy Of Overthinking

December 1942.

World War II was ravaging the planet. By that time, the German Army had conquered most of Western Europe, leading to millions of killed, wounded, and displaced people all over the continent. Dozens of nations found themselves on the brink of destruction.

English forces, led by Winston Churchill, were facing the urgent need to transport hundreds of tanks across the British Channel to mainland Europe. The bulk of the job was to be done

with landing craft tanks (LCTs), amphibious assault vessels specifically designed for deploying tanks on beachheads. But there was a problem. The LCTs available at that time to the Royal Navy were ill-fitted for the terrain across the Channel. A new model had to be designed and produced en masse to allow assaulting the flat beaches of northern France.

Despite the urgency of the situation, the creators of the Mark 4 version of the assault landing craft were spending a disproportionate amount of time debating design improvement proposals. They wanted the MK4 to perform flawlessly. After discovering this, Winston Churchill sent a brief note to his chief military adviser, General Hastings Ismay:

"The maxim 'Nothing avails but perfection' may be spelt shorter: 'Paralysis.'"^{*}

In the words above, Churchill has crystallized one of the many faces of overthinking. Can you imagine how deep are the roots of this mental process? It's a cognitive pattern that appears to be universal for all humans, regardless of age, education, background, and other factors.

Each of us experiences overthinking in our own way. Sometimes, it becomes too frequent, too powerful. Recklessly persistent to the point where it starts disrupting other processes in our life. When that is the case, it's crucial to notice the process as soon as possible. Otherwise, it becomes way harder to resist its progression.

So how do we know when we're overthinking?

What Is Overthinking (And What It Absolutely Isn't)

As the name implies, overthinking is the action and process of dealing with persistent thoughts, doubts, or worries. More often than not, this impairs one's ability to take real action.

Every once in a while, we all get lost in our own thoughts. It doesn't matter if you're a college student, an entrepreneur, or an officer of the Royal Navy designing a new type of landing craft. Sometimes we will have to deal with thoughts running wild in our heads.

There's overthinking in the paralyzing fear of the teenager trying to ask their crush on a date, pondering the best opening line or the fanciest place to visit.

It's the indecision of the first-time entrepreneur, unable to pick a brand name for their debut project.

It's in the ever-skeptical mind of the copywriter, the advertiser, and the media buyer desperately trying to filter out their marketing campaigns to optimize the expenses.

It's in the drama that our brains start at 2 a.m. when we're trying to fall asleep, offering a dozen witty comebacks that we could've used in an argument we had 20 years ago.

It's even in the inability to choose where we'll have lunch today when all options sound enticing enough but our time and resources are limited.

We've all been there from time to time. We know what overthinking is all about on an intuitive level. But there's also one essential thing that overthinking is NOT.

Overthinking in itself is not a mental health condition, just like coughing or sneezing aren't standalone diseases*. All of them can be symptoms of a wide range of medical issues. All of them can also be perfectly normal reactions to particular events. It all depends on the context, the severity of the phenomena, and how much they affect your quality of life.

After inhaling a particularly annoying speck of dust, you're likely to sneeze. That's a healthy reaction. In this case, sneezing is not a symptom of anything. Now, imagine a different scenario. It's springtime, and you're sneezing non-stop. You also have a runny nose, itchy eyes, a somewhat swollen face—the whole package. You don't feel so good, not in the slightest. In this case, sneezing is a symptom that, together with other parts of the puzzle, suggests it may be a good idea to see a doctor. Looks like you're allergic to springtime.

A similar logic can be used for evaluating overthinking. For example, imagine you can't fall asleep the night before an important speech. You've spent hours rehearsing your performance over and over again, and now it feels like your brain has forgotten how to calm down and stop thinking about the matter. It's in full overdrive mode. The thoughts roam

relentlessly in your head, preventing you from falling asleep. For the most part, that's a totally understandable scenario. It's a normal, albeit unpleasant, mental reaction to the stress before an important event. Most likely, everything will go back to normal after you deliver your speech and take some time to wind down.

On the other hand, excessive overthinking can be a symptom of depression, generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), and other mental health issues. How can you tell the difference? Well, here are three major red flags to look out for.

Your overthinking becomes versatile. It happens not only before an important event but also in day-to-day scenarios, like calling your friend over the phone. You don't have to rehearse that, right? If you do, and the whole process feels extremely stressful every time, this may suggest an underlying anxiety disorder.

Your overthinking gets persistent and frequent. You find yourself dealing with it not just every once in a while, but on a regular basis. Weekly. Daily, even. This becomes especially bothersome when the bouts of overthinking are less connected to external factors and start without apparent triggers or causes.

Your overthinking significantly decreases your mood, self-esteem, and overall well-being. When the process turns from a series of mental debates into never-ending waves of criticism and self-loathing, it could be part of a larger problem. Depression, for example.

If you suspect that your overthinking has deeper roots, consider reaching out to a mental health professional for guidance and support.

Sometimes overthinking appears as a symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after you survive through a highly disturbing event, or even just witness it. Children are much more susceptible to all forms of trauma, so they can develop overthinking as a coping mechanism. Later on, they start perceiving overthinking as a part of their personality, unable to identify it as a reaction to previous disturbing events*.

In other cases, overthinking comes hand in hand with insomnia. If you've ever found yourself unable to fall asleep after 4 hours of tossing and turning in bed, you know how awful it feels. However, identifying the primary issue is essential here. Sometimes you can't sleep because of the overthinking, like when you can't relax on the night before delivering a speech. Sometimes, however, it works the other way around. You just can't sleep, and that's the main problem. You don't have an important event coming up; your day was perfectly fine; you avoided coffee after 3 p.m. Still, you can't sleep, and at some point, the thoughts come rushing in just to keep your mind busy with something.

And guess what? Chances are that if someone were to ask you the next day about your sleep the night before, you'd complain about the insomnia without mentioning the relentless thoughts. Not even once, and that is a massive problem. If you don't acknowledge a process, you have no way of improving it.

But how is this possible? Isn't overthinking such an obvious process? How can it stay unnoticed by your friends, family, and even yourself?

I'm Not Overthinking. It's Just My Personality.

Some overthinkers may believe they're just prone to worrying, timid, cautious, or lacking initiative. Often, that's not true at all. Overthinking may be the real reason for inaction, the real blocker to growth and success. Instead of seeing this, some people opt to explain the situation by focusing on their personality traits and beliefs about themselves.

In other words, some timid people are not timid at all. They're just overthinking themselves into a state of paralysis, unable to ask their crush on a date.

Some die-hard introverts may secretly be extroverts or ambiverts who just have trouble approaching people or picking events. Not because they don't enjoy company or having fun, but purely because they get lost in their head picking the best move. After some time, anxiety kicks in. They feel it and explain the whole situation by the fact that they're just too introverted.

Some unsuccessful entrepreneurs may have a similar problem, not related to luck, competence, or business sense. Maybe they're just wasting too much time and energy overthinking the small details instead of frantically cranking out prototypes until one of them hits gold. Maybe they're afraid of failing. Maybe they've bought into the notion of finding the perfect idea before putting in the work to bring it to life. In both cases, there's a lot of overthinking involved.

So, you see that there are quite a few ways to interpret overthinking habits as a fundamental part of your personality. And since personality is a much more stable construct, people just try to make peace with it and learn to live with their overthinking.

Well, here's the good news: It doesn't have to be this way. There are plenty of effective solutions to overthinking.

Over the last few decades, psychologists, scientists, and coaches have come up with practical techniques for combating overthinking. By learning them and adding them to your "mental toolbox," you'll be able to minimize the impact of overthinking on your life—or even overcome it entirely. Well, for the most part.

But you have to acknowledge the issue first. If you don't, you won't be able to address it. You will keep thinking of it as part of your self, as just a component of your personality, missing the whole point (and the possibility) of changing this mental habit.

Sometimes, it takes a wise observer from the outside to spot the issue. Had Churchill not pointed out that overthinking was blocking the LCT production... who knows how many more months would have been needlessly wasted? How many more lives would have been lost?

Other times, you don't have the luxury of having an observer to bring your attention to the matter. Then, you've got to be the one playing detective and analyzing the hints scattered all around. So, let's do just that. You may be an overthinker if anything from the list below sounds familiar to you:

- You mentally play back conversations you've had months or even years ago, coming up with clever arguments or snarky remarks that you could've used back then.
- Before making a casual phone call, you take a few minutes to rehearse how the conversation will probably go. Almost as if it were a business call and not a chat with a friend.
- You clutch the phone in your hand whenever you get close to a balcony, imagining a dozen ways in which you could drop the device.
- You spend a disproportionate amount of time on minor tasks, pursuing perfection.
- You get random thoughts like "What if my car explodes right now?" As a result, you spiral down into a mix of imaginary crisis management and a debate on how likely the event is to happen in the first place.
- After locking up your house, you make 5-10 steps outside, then stop. You return to your door and check if you've locked the house. You say out loud, "I have locked the house." You make 5-10 steps and then start wondering if you've really locked the house.
- When planning an event, you end up with a long list of things that could possibly go wrong, along with a few solutions to each point. Nothing bad ever happens, most of the time, but you're still excessively prepared. Just in case.
- You spend days or even weeks choosing gifts for your relatives and friends. And even then, you're rarely 100% happy with your picks. If only you had more time to think it through...
- When your boss says he wants to discuss something with you later, you soon end up with a list of catastrophic scenarios for the upcoming talk. (You're definitely getting fired.)

Most things in the list above aren't serious. They aren't life-wrecking habits at their core, not even close. Still, they can bring plenty of discomfort to you or your loved ones, especially if you let these patterns grow and strengthen over time.

In severe cases of paralyzing overthinking, its manifestations can gradually erode one's self-esteem. It's tough to feel confident and relaxed when every phone call feels like a major challenge. The only solution, in this case, is to identify the problem and start actively resisting its progression.

Of course, there are extremely effective techniques to combat overthinking in general (and even specific manifestations of overthinking), and we'll explore many of them in the next

chapters.

In the meantime, here are a few things that you can start practicing right now.

Action Steps

1. Identify your own unique overthinking habits. Write them down and see if you can identify any patterns. For example, are you more likely to overthink in a social situation (e.g., when making a phone call) or when you're alone (e.g., in bed, when trying to fall asleep)?
2. Examine the emotional component of your overthinking. What do you feel when you're lost in thought? Are you worried, fearful, excited, confused?
3. Do your parents or other close relatives have this proneness to overthinking too? Is it something that runs in your family, or have you acquired it on your own?
4. Make a list of the things that will change in your life for the better when you stop overthinking so much. Will you be more productive at work? Will you feel happier and calmer? Will your relationships improve?

All of the tasks and questions above will help you learn more about your particular manner of overthinking. Why is this important? Mostly because different kinds of overthinking require specific approaches for the best results.

For example, remember the short note that Churchill sent to his General? He pointed out that the root cause of his men's overthinking was perfectionism. They wanted to create the best landing craft tank ever produced. Churchill just needed the job done, as soon as possible.

In the next chapter, we'll explore other types of overthinking. Some have nothing to do with perfectionism.

For example... are you more like a cat or a fox?

References

1. Churchill, W. (1951) *The Second World War, Volume IV: The Hinge of Fate*. London: Cassell.

2. You can check how overthinking is not included in the *International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems*, 10th Revision: <https://icd.who.int/browse10/2019/en>
3. Dempsey, K. (n.d.) 'What is overthinking disorder? Does it exist?' *The Awareness Centre*. Retrieved September 18, 2023, from <https://theawarenesscentre.com/what-is-overthinking-disorder-does-it-exist/>