

FREE FIRST CHAPTER

STOP OVERTHINKING TO FINALLY GET STUFF DONE

Your Brain Is A Time Machine

How To Reframe Your Mindset So You Don't Waste Time Worrying About Things That Don't Matter And Direct Your Energy Toward Results — Chapter One. About a 13-minute read.

What was the worst nightmare you've ever had as a kid?

For some children, this could've been a monster. For others, it could've been a major issue in the family or a public embarrassment at school. I can understand those nightmares, but I don't remember having anything similar.

It took me several decades to make sense of my strange terrors.

I remember waking up screaming at age seven, with beads of cold sweat running down my face. For the next half an hour, I couldn't calm myself down, let alone describe that dream to my parents. So, what was it all about?

I'm outside, walking to the local market down the street. After a while, I notice I'm not getting anywhere. The store appears to be slowly drifting farther and farther. I hurry. I start running, but I'm still getting nowhere. Eventually, the street around me speeds up, and at a higher pace than I do. I can't keep up, no matter how hard I try! The trees and buildings smudge into a colorful motion blur. The wind howls in my ears. I run until I'm out of breath—then wake up gasping for air and choking on my tears.

This exact dream repeated itself every few years, then stopped. For good, I hope.

A decade later, I was reading Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, the second installment of Alice's adventures*. It's a wonderful book, but one scene felt eerily familiar:

the Red Queen's race.

There, Alice was running as fast as she could, yet not getting anywhere.

"Here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!" said the Queen.

This terrifying concept has stuck with me since as far as I can remember—first as a childhood nightmare, later as the Red Queen's race.

The very idea that you could be putting ALL your energy and resources and STILL not moving forward... It sends chills down my spine. Luckily, that's just an imaginary situation. Right?

That's what I used to believe.

Later, I realized I was a chronic overthinker and finally connected all the dots. See if this sounds familiar...

You spend hours upon hours "working" on a project... But see little to no progress. You brace yourself for dozens of outcomes and problems... But they keep popping up in your mind at an ever-increasing pace.

You can't keep up. You're overwhelmed. Stuck.

In this case, moving forward feels impossible. It takes all your inner resources to just stay in place—in the insanity of the Red Queen's race.

Now, here's the good news: It's possible to escape it, and I want to show you a proven route.

In this book, I'll share the techniques and strategies that I found to be the most effective for dialing down my overthinking. Some of them helped me finish medical school, and others came in handy while I switched careers from anesthesiology to writing.

Did these strategies “cure” my overthinking? Not exactly.

Overthinking isn’t a medical condition on its own. It doesn’t have to be cured, but to be managed effectively. Consider it a mental habit that brings trouble only if it spirals out of control. When this happens, you may struggle with impaired productivity, sub-optimal performance, a tremendous waste of resources, and a wide range of mental health issues.

But what’s the alternative, if you learn to manage your overthinking better?

Your energy will be turned into tangible progress, not just frantically running in place. You’ll be able to work consistently and perform at a high level without sacrificing mental health. Most likely, you’ll be on the path to a more fulfilling, yet considerably less stressful life.

Regardless of your specific line of work, I’m sure that the concepts in this book will help you reduce overthinking and empower growth. Psychological principles, time management tips, productivity hacks, mindset shifts—we’ve got an exciting journey ahead!

And the best part?

You’ll receive exercises and prompts after every chapter. If you put them to good use, I’m confident that you’ll see tangible results. With proper focus and practice, overthinking will become much less of an obstacle to your productivity by the time you reach the last page.

We’ll get there, but even the longest journey begins with a single step.

So, let’s start walking.

—Ivan Kokhno

Chapter 1: Your Brain Is A Time Machine

Your brain is a time machine.

It perceives, measures, and tells the time to control and fine-tune the intricate machinery of organs inside you. For example, consider how it orchestrates all your circadian rhythms—

events that happen at roughly the same time every day.

- Every morning between 7 and 8 a.m., your body produces a spike of the hormone cortisol which helps you wake up and get ready for the day's challenges.
- At night, your cortisol levels drop, and another hormone enters the stage: melatonin. It triggers sleepiness and helps you wind down for a night of rest and recovery*.
- Hunger and fullness also have a circadian rhythm. The evening peak in appetite appears to be an adaptation to the upcoming overnight fast, dictated by sleep*.

Your brain plays a major role in controlling all the processes above, and many more. But that's just barely scratching the surface of the mind's relationship with time.

As a proper time machine, your brain also allows you to travel. Every day, you jump back and forth in mental journeys across the chronoscape. Each trip is a recreation of past events (memories) or a simulation of the future (dreams, worries).

The main purpose of these time travels? To help you make better decisions in the present.

This concept was introduced by neuroscientist and author Dean Buonomano, who explored the evolutionary significance and psychological consequences of the brain's complex relationship with time*.

Without this never-ending mental jumping back and forth in time, humankind would never have invented agriculture, tools, or food preservation. After all, deciding not to eat the whole rabbit that you hunted down today requires you to make a mental trip into the future and consider the consequences of that choice. What if you don't manage to catch anything tomorrow? Wouldn't it be better to save a bit of that meat for later?

If that sounds a bit far afield, let's picture a scenario that's closer to our day-to-day reality.

Imagine you're getting ready to meet a friend for brunch. You throw a glance at your watch. The time is 1:27 p.m. and you've got to decide on the best way to reach your destination. Google Maps says you can take the local bus and reach the place in half an hour. Just in time.

And then—WHOOSH! Your time machine of a brain fires up.

You recall how just a week ago, at about this time of the day, you took the same bus. It was overcrowded, barely moving through the city traffic, and hot like a Finnish sauna on fire. You definitely don't want to go through that experience again. You call an Uber and reach your destination in less than 15 minutes.

Your mental time travel to the past helped you avoid an awful trip in the future, and reach your destination in time, in a better mood, and considerably less sweaty.

In a similar fashion, your brain guides you into mental simulations of the future. For example, when you're choosing a birthday gift for someone, you go through all the possible options and imagine how that special person would react to each of them. When the imaginary reaction is particularly joyful—Bingo! You've found the perfect gift.

As you can see, mental time travel is the essence of hindsight and foresight, helping us to navigate even the smallest of decisions effectively. Unfortunately, there is a flip side.

Time travel isn't just useful. It's also dangerous.

Can you get lost in these mental time journeys? Is it possible to get stuck in the past or future, unable to come back to your own time?

Absolutely. And not just possible, but even quite easy to do. You've probably fallen prey to this temporal trap dozens, if not hundreds, of times before.

If you haven't guessed it already, it's overthinking.

Temporal Traps 101

Overthinking is the general term for repeatedly dwelling on the same thoughts, worries, or doubts. People who struggle with excessive overthinking often have trouble making decisions and taking action.

From a medical perspective, overthinking isn't a recognized mental health issue on its own. You won't find a code for it in the International Classification of Diseases (ICD)*. Nevertheless, overthinking can be an early symptom of a wide range of conditions, including anxiety and depressive disorders.

That being said, overthinking isn't automatically a bad or unhealthy thing. Everyone does it from time to time, in their own way. Do any of these scenarios sound familiar to you?

- Spending an excessive amount of time on a work-related task, polishing every little detail to a level of perfection that's not required.
- Mentally revisiting discussions or arguments from the past, coming up with various ideas of what you should've said at the time.
- Feeling paralyzed before the prospect of getting to know new people, worrying about what kind of impression you would make on them.
- Postponing the launch of a personal project or business over and over, trying to figure out every single detail of the path ahead before you even make the first step.
- Having trouble falling asleep the night before an important meeting or event, imagining everything that could go wrong the next day.
- Choosing the perfect gift for several weeks or even months, going through hundreds of possible options, always discarding them in search of something even better.

None of those situations is pleasant, but they're all perfectly natural. Sometimes, they may even be beneficial. Those extra hours you've put into polishing a minor task at work may not have been too efficient, but sometimes this level of attention to detail could put you on the radar of your boss. The weeks or months in search of the ideal gift may have been draining, but the amount of care and love that you've put into the process won't go unnoticed by that special person.

Overthinking is such a universal habit for humankind that it has spawned a colorful bouquet of synonyms over the decades. You've probably seen a lot of them in books, movies, and media in general:

- Obsessive thinking
- Mental chatter
- Overanalyzing

- Thinking too much
- Beating a dead horse
- Overintellectualizing
- Being a worrywart
- Micromanaging
- Persistent thoughts

Of course, each of those versions explores a particular aspect or way of overthinking. Perhaps, the funniest is the French term *l'esprit d'escalier*, "the wit of the staircase" *. It refers to a particularly successful remark that comes to your mind too late to be used. Imagine finishing a conversation or argument, going your way, and then thinking of the best comment at the bottom of the stairs as you leave the gathering. Too late!

Portals To The Past, Fissures To The Future

One thing that all forms of overthinking have in common is their tendency to abduct you from the present moment and send you on a hectic time trip, either backward or forward.

From this perspective, there are two main types of overthinking: ruminating over the past or worrying about the future. In both cases, you could get lost in thought for many hours or even days. That's why the primary danger of these "time traps" is that they steal your attention from the present, impairing action and diluting your presence in current events.

Rumination overthinking is based on an inability to let go of a past event. The intensity and duration of this process usually depend on how important or traumatizing this event was for you.

In most cases, rumination can be described as a relentless barrage of SHOULD HAVES firing in your mind as it goes through simulations of what you (or others) were supposed to do in the heat of the moment.

After a tough breakup with a romantic partner, some people can get stuck for months or even years, unable to make peace with the separation. As a result, they isolate themselves

and can't form new, healthier relationships. They're trapped in an incessant review of what should have been instead of building new connections in the present.

In the event of an unexpected lay-off at work, it may be easy to slip into rumination over your previous performance. What should have been your attitude? Maybe you didn't show enough enthusiasm? Or maybe you should've worked overtime more often, learned a new skill, or received a new certificate to showcase?

Sometimes, rumination comes without a "should have" component. It feels instead like a broken record of a memory, playing through the same situation over and over again. Usually, it's a hurtful recollection (like experiencing abuse or surviving a car accident), but it can also be a memory of something pleasant (like a fleeting moment of fame or massive luck).

Regardless of the specifics, any type of excessive rumination is detrimental because it undermines your ability to act in the present. Even though everyone does it from time to time, it's the degree that matters. So, is there a way to counteract this process? How do you close a portal to the past? Let's go through a few techniques based on cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT).

Attentional Grounding

If rumination is a portal to the past, attentional grounding is an anchor to the present. It brings you back to reality by intentionally focusing your mind on what you can see, hear, or feel now.

How do you practice attentional grounding? A classic exercise is the 5-4-3-2-1 technique. Go through the list below one point at a time, noting down or naming aloud the following:*

1. Five things you can see (e.g., a cloud in the sky, a book on the shelf, etc.)
2. Four things you can touch or feel (e.g., the softness of your clothes, a cool breeze blowing from your window)

3. Three things you can hear (e.g., the city traffic, the humming of your fridge, your stomach rumbling)
4. Two things you can smell (e.g., the freshly brewed coffee in your mug, the scent of freshly cut grass outside)
5. One thing you can taste (e.g., breakfast, mint toothpaste)

This exercise is tougher than it looks. Sometimes you need a good few minutes to focus on your sensations and define exactly what it is that you're feeling—and that's the whole point of grounding! By bringing your mind back to what you're seeing, hearing, or smelling now, you can considerably weaken the grip of the past on your mind.

Cognitive Defusion

Cognitive defusion is a CBT technique for increasing the distance between the thinker and their thoughts, essentially de-fusing (i.e. separating) them*.

The goal here is to realize that you aren't your thoughts. You're just experiencing them. Notice and observe as they pop up and dissipate in your mind. Don't fight them, don't entertain them, just let them be.

For example, let's say that you notice you're slipping into rumination over a recent problem at work—an important email that you missed. Instead of mentally dissecting that event and looking at it from all possible angles, just acknowledge that it happened and that you're thinking about it right now. It will pass. You've received and sent emails previously, and you will do so again in the future. Even if this missed email feels special, in reality, it's just one out of thousands that you'll interact with in your life.

Visualization

This technique goes alongside the previous one (cognitive distancing). Essentially, as you imagine the object of your rumination taking form, you increase the distance between you and the thought. Rumination takes place in your head (really close, right?) but you can "take it out" by imagining it as something else, outside of your body and mind*.

- That important email that you failed to answer in time? Imagine it as an envelope-shaped cloud drifting away through the sky. It's there, but it's so far away, up high, slowly leaving your field of view.
- After breaking up with someone and feeling unable to move on, you can mentally or physically write your former partner a letter expressing your emotions. Then, tear it to pieces or burn it down. (Just make sure to do this in a safe way.)

Now that we've finished exploring the basics of rumination, the first type of overthinking, let's close these portals to the past and turn 180 degrees. Get ready to explore the parallel universes of what's yet to come as we slip into fissures to the future!

The second type of overthinking, worrying about future events, has its own peculiarities and mechanisms. Many of them can be disastrous for your productivity. In the following chapters, we'll go through a range of strategies and techniques to help you perform your best. But first, let's practice what we've already covered.

Action Steps

1. Practice attentional grounding. Pick a piece of paper or open your favorite note-taking app and write down five things you can see right now, four things you can feel, three things you can hear, two things you can smell, and one thing you can taste. Next time, when you feel that your mind is slipping into overthinking, repeat this exercise to escape that portal to the past and return to the present.
2. Categorize your time traps. Divide a piece of paper into two sections: Past (Rumination) and Future (Worrying). Note down the most common themes of your overthinking, categorizing them into one of these categories. This exercise could give you some insights into recurring patterns in your overthinking, making it easier to approach the issue.

In the next chapter, we'll tackle a phenomenon that could easily be the most detrimental effect of worrying about the future: analysis paralysis. This mental state can be so debilitating that any progress becomes virtually impossible. You just can't move forward.

Almost as if you've been turned to stone.

References

1. Carroll, L., & Tenniel, J. (1999). *Through the looking-glass*. Dover Publications.
2. Mohd Azmi, N. A. S., Juliana, N., Azmani, S., Mohd Effendy, N., Abu, I. F., Mohd Fahmi Teng, N. I., & Das, S. (2021). Cortisol on circadian rhythm and its effect on cardiovascular system. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(2), 676. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18020676>
3. Scheer, F. A. J. L., Morris, C. J., & Shea, S. A. (2013). The internal circadian clock increases hunger and appetite in the evening independent of food intake and other behaviors. *Obesity*, 21(3), 421–423. <https://doi.org/10.1002/oby.20351>
4. Buonomano, D. (2017). *Your brain is a time machine: The neuroscience and physics of time*. W. W. Norton & Company.
5. World Health Organization. (2022). *ICD-11: International classification of diseases for mortality and morbidity statistics* (eleventh revision). <https://icd.who.int/browse/2024-01/mms/en>
6. L'esprit de l'escalier. (2024, March 11). In *Wikipedia*. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/L%27esprit_de_l%27escalier
7. Smith, S. (2018, April 10). 5-4-3-2-1 coping technique for anxiety. University of Rochester Medical Center. <https://www.urmc.rochester.edu/behavioral-health-partners/bhp-blog/april-2018/5-4-3-2-1-coping-technique-for-anxiety.aspx>
8. The Washington Center for Cognitive Therapy. (n.d.). Cognitive defusion: An empirically supported strategy to change your relationship with problematic thoughts. Retrieved April 2, 2024, from <https://washingtoncenterforcognitivetherapy.com/cognitive-defusion/>
9. Jyotirgama. (n.d.). Cognitive defusion techniques from ACT: How to distance yourself from unhelpful thoughts. Retrieved April 2, 2024, from <https://jyotirgama.org/opinion/cognitive-defusion-technique-act/>