

# How to deal with overthinking

Interview by: Anna Basiková for Elle magazin

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## When are we most prone to overthinking?

Especially during life periods and situations which either don't have a good solution at all or the solution is somehow disappointing or painful. In such moments, more thinking will usually not help us, nevertheless, we become attached to it even more. However, it only spins the wheels of stress further. What we need in these moments is the ability to make a conscious pause, to be aware of our emotions and to feel through them. We need to first admit and accept the experienced loss or frustration. Unpleasant sensations in the body usually accompany this process, therefore, especially people who don't understand how emotions work, run back to the impotent cycle of overthinking. But in the long run they cause themselves even more misery by trying to avoid the hurt and loss this way.

## What is the source of our neurotic thinking?

It lays in our somewhat obsessive belief that our mind can figure out everything with logic and that everything can be solved. This belief is very dangerous, and yet most of us have been led to believe it since childhood. But we, humans, are mainly emotional beings. If our autonomic nervous system is not relaxed, we will not figure out anything useful anyway. Emotions are evolutionarily older and are biologically superior to thinking. If I am afraid, angry or sad, it would be much better if I honestly and vulnerably shared my experience with someone. That will bring more relief and support rather than thinking. Afterwards, maybe, I can come back to logic again.



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### What do we cause ourselves with constant overthinking?

There is a danger that we will cycle in our thoughts and run frantically from one to another without having any significant positive effect. At the same time, our internal tension will increase, and we will be even more stressed. Unfortunately, in this way, we usually detach ourselves from our basic human needs, and what is even worse, we begin to isolate ourselves from contact with other people.

### Is it possible to prevent overthinking in any way?

It's helpful to realize that we are all prone to overthinking occasionally. It's probably the tax we pay for our evolution as a species, especially for having such a developed neocortex and the ability to think abstractly. Thanks to our intelligence, we have become the most dominant species on the planet, so we sometimes forget that thinking has some limits and that it can be harmful, too.

Therefore, much of my therapeutic work is about how to return from thinking to experiencing. To start understanding emotions as something useful. To be able to stop for a moment and allow the inbuilt balancing mechanisms of our psyche (such as crying, trembling or shouting) to come back into the open for a while so that emotions can be processed and then the body can relax afterwards and also learn from this experience.

### And is it possible to get rid of this bad habit completely?

Honestly, probably not completely. Our brain produces around 50 thoughts per minute, and we just get lost in them once in a while. However, we don't have to fall into this cycle so often and so dramatically. Changing the approach to our thoughts and not taking them so dead seriously, can help enormously. My psychotherapy teacher Brad Blanton always liked to say that our human mind is a paranoid instrument and sometimes a bullshit generator. It's an exaggeration of course, but there is something to it.

Thinking is very valuable to us, but far from always and not even as often as we tell ourselves. Some of our thoughts don't even correspond to reality and can be paranoidly coloured. We can all probably look back in life when we were undoubtedly convinced about something, and today, we acknowledge that it was completely different. Therefore, it is beneficial to learn to laugh at our extreme seriousness and extreme attachment to our beliefs from time to time and question them a little bit. Humour has great healing and relaxing effect in this regard.

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## What activities help to deal with chronic overthinking? And what to do when we are trying to fall asleep?

Activities that help us be present and be aware of our bodies usually help. Yoga or other types of exercise work quite well for some people. Autogenous relaxation can also be very good or even meditation, if it's not based on some esoteric bullshit. We can also become more present and calm through honest conversations in which we do not play superhuman, but we admit our vulnerabilities. Simple, honest sharing among friends and family works the best for me as a relief from overthinking. It is also very important to consciously be aware of our own bodily sensations and emotions. I know I repeat myself over and over again, but this is one of the best things people can learn to increase the quality of their life.

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Sebastian James is a psychologist and facilitator working both for the private and corporate sector. He studied in Europe and the United States and worked for companies such as Novartis, ExxonMobil and PwC. In his work he focuses on authenticity, direct communication, understanding human emotions and needs, expanding body awareness, relaxation and play. Sebastian facilitated personal development workshops in the Czech Republic, Poland, Germany, France and Greece and worked with people from over 25 countries.

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