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Are You an Overthinker?

By Debbie DeAngelo
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We all overthink things from time to time but for some, it's a habitual nuisance. Comments such as "I keep replaying the conversation in my head," "It's tough to shut off my brain," or "I can't get this out of my mind," are common for overthinkers.

Overthinking everything not only robs you of joy, but it also can be distracting. Contrary to what you may believe, it's not productive at all. Whether you are ruminating about the past or worrying about the future, time spent in this endless mental loop rarely results in a great solution to life's problems. These obsessive thoughts become like a hamster wheel in your mind. You just keep replaying the scenario and creating heightened feelings of worry and self-doubt. Often, it feels as if you can't let go and think of anything else.

Signs of an Active Mind

By now you may be wondering about what's considered overthinking. Although there are many characteristics, here are six hallmark signs.

- Frequently reminding yourself of your mistakes.
- Second guessing your decisions.
- Rehashing conversations with people and wishing you'd said something differently or searching for hidden meaning in what they said or did.
- Dwelling on something that was said or done that is upsetting to you or reading too much into a situation.
- Fixating on things over which you have no control.
- Jumping to worst-case scenarios.

Overthinking is not a mental disorder. However, it can sometimes accompany depression and anxiety disorders. Whatever the reason, if you are unable to manage this on your own, seek help from a licensed therapist.

Quieting your Thoughts

The good news is that overthinkers are not destined to remain overthinkers. There are steps you can take towards achieving a calmer mind.

Trust in your decisions. As the saying goes, "Hindsight is 20/20." In retrospect, it's easy to see a situation or problem with more clarity, but we don't have that benefit at the time. Recognize that you made the best decision you could at that moment with the information you had. There's nothing wrong with analyzing and learning from missteps. This can be of benefit in future decision-making as long as you don't keep replaying it over in your head and kicking yourself. That's the difference between problem solving and overthinking.

Don't take things personally or make assumptions. In the highly insightful book, "The Four Agreements," author Don Miguel Ruiz points out these two truths. Other people's negative or rude comments reflect their own perceptions and issues. It's not about you. Your self-worth need not be based on the opinions of others. Also, our mind can creatively fill in missing details about a situation. These assumptions usually serve only to fuel our despair and misery. Keep in mind that the other party may be having a bad day or struggling in some way too.

Keep it in perspective. If something is not important to you five years from now, should you be spending more than five minutes worrying about it? This question helps to tease out the minutia. Even much of the major life stuff is not within our control, so constantly ruminating doesn't alter anything. Identify what is meaningful in your life as well as the aspects you can influence or control. Not every decision is worth draining your brain, emotions, or time.

Become more comfortable with uncertainty. Uncertainty is an uncomfortable feeling, but life is full of it, so we need to learn how to flow with it. Sometimes spending an excessive amount of time reviewing an issue falsely leads us to believe we have a handle on it. Eventually the situation escalates in our mind and that's when the catastrophizing begins.

Perform a probability check. Speaking of uncertainty and catastrophizing – ask yourself how likely these worst-case scenarios are to occur. The words “What are the chances of this actually happening?” may become your mantra.

Schedule worry time. Are you a consummate worrywart? It might seem counterintuitive but by setting aside 15 minutes a day to focus on your worries, you may find that overthinking declines. Rather than repeatedly returning to the issue, you're containing it within a limited period. If it keeps popping back into your mind, tell yourself you will think about it during the designated time.

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