



Stop Overthinking It! Tips to Stress Less

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By Rachael Moeller Gorman

In slow-pitch softball I couldn't buy a hit. I would stand at bat, waiting, planning, and preparing for the ball. And that was the problem. My brain and all its relentless thinking sabotaged my instinct.

I'm hardly the only one who overthinks things. We all do it. In fact, research shows that our brains constantly try to forecast the future, to anticipate what will come next. In caveman times, that meant a fast prediction that a lion was probably following the herd of running antelopes, so stay away. Today it means mulling the healthfulness of every item on a four-page restaurant menu before picking the one that's

least likely to pack on pounds, or agonizing over just the right witty words to post on Facebook in anticipation of judgment by hundreds of people.

We also fret about our past experiences and decisions. But while some self-reflection helps us survive and thrive, too much can make us feel trapped and overwhelmed. "When you're overthinking, you're going round and round in a loop instead of moving forward and problem solving," explains Lori Hilt, PhD, an assistant professor of psychology at Lawrence University in Wisconsin.

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Stuck on a Feeling

Women tend to be overthinkers, research shows. For instance, we're 42 percent more likely to ruminate than men are when we're feeling down. This may be because we're more attuned to our emotions and try really hard to understand what causes them, studies suggest. Your individual tendency to overthink may also be linked to how you were raised. Having overcontrolling parents may set you up to do it, perhaps because such mothers and fathers try to suppress children's thoughts and emotions.

No matter what causes overthinking, all of us can relate. "We spend most of our time in the past or

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the future," Hilt says. "It's very hard to be in the present moment. Our minds are always racing." Take my slow-pitch problem. Sian Beilock, PhD, the author of *Choke: What the Secrets of the Brain Reveal About Getting It Right When You Have To*, calls my failure to hit the ball "choking under pressure." When you have too much time before you have to perform, she explains, the conscious mind takes over what should be an instinctive reaction and assesses every possible action or solution until it sputters and fades. "We tend to think that having a lot of time is beneficial and that paying more attention is a good thing, but often it adds the opportunity for error and disrupts performance," Beilock says.

Similarly, processing endless little choices each day (what to tweet; which of your 100 daily e-mails to save, delete, or reply to; which of the dozens of shows on your DVR to watch) can get in the way when an important decision pops up. That's because every time you have to make a choice -- whether to go to the gym or sleep in, say, or to eat a yogurt as opposed to a doughnut -- you sap some of your willpower, which lessens your self-control. This phenomenon is known as decision fatigue. "When you have it, you tend to take the default option because it's easier," says Roy Baumeister, PhD, a research psychologist at Florida State University and coauthor of the book *Willpower: Rediscovering the Greatest Human Strength*. You order a pizza because you're too overwhelmed to think about what to make for dinner, or you buy the expensive appliance because you're stressed out by comparison shopping.

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Get Out of Your Head

There's a fine line between thinking constructively and slipping into a toxic thought spiral. The key is being able to stop obsessing over whatever is bothering you and to move on to problem solving -- or just letting it go if there's nothing you can do. Try these tips when your head is spinning.

Forget You

When your mind is replaying the same thoughts over and over, distract yourself. For instance, every time you start ruminating about why you can't get over your ex, conjure up the juicy deliciousness of a ripe red apple or, better still, Ryan Gosling's abs. Instead of analyzing ad infinitum how your boss critiqued your latest project, go out and see a funny movie with friends. Research shows that people who can refocus on positive or neutral thoughts or activities were less depressed than those who continued to ruminate. Later, when you're in a happier frame of mind, you can work on coming up with solutions and a plan of action.

Be an Identity Thief

When you're completely immersed in your own problems, it's hard to break free. So instead, pretend you're listening to a friend's troubles and then giving her advice on what to do. (You wouldn't berate your bestie for what's on her mind, right?) In a series of studies, Ethan Kross, PhD, a psychologist at the University of Michigan, found that when you act as an observer of yourself, you're less emotional about your problems, your blood pressure is lower, and you're in a better mood, even days later. Changing your perspective actually changes your thoughts and physiology. Plus -- who knows? -- you might come up with a smart solution or two.

Find Your Focus

Doing even a short session of mindfulness meditation -- concentrating on the present moment by bringing your attention to your breath and coming back to it whenever your mind wanders -- may help reduce rumination, according to research. If you're not the sit-and-be-Zen type, take a Spinning or Zumba class and concentrate on your movements. "Anything that trains your attention on the present can be helpful in keeping your mind from wandering to the past or thinking about the future," Hilt says.

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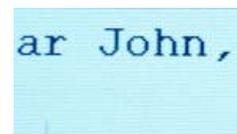
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It's also a good idea to keep your eyes on the prize. A 2010 study found that when cricket players wore contact lenses to make their vision slightly blurry, their batting performance was just as good as it normally was because the lenses forced them to focus only on the ball instead of on all the extraneous details. The lesson: You don't always need all the information you think you need. Trusting your gut and ignoring every last possibility can help when you're struggling with any big decision, like buying a house or accepting a job offer. "It's not always better to have more choices," Beilock says. "Some research shows that when people have too many options, they're not very satisfied with any of them."

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Get in a Groove

To prevent decision fatigue, remove the piddly decisions from your life. "There's President Obama's strategy to wear the same kind of suit every day so he doesn't waste his energy making minor decisions," Baumeister says. "For the same reason, some people have a set routine every morning; they eat the same breakfast, take the same route to work and so on. You don't want to use up your brainpower making decisions at a mundane level; you want to save it for the more important things."

Hit the Sack

Get your zzz's -- at least seven hours a night. "If you have a decent amount of sleep and a good breakfast, you start the day with plenty of willpower," Baumeister says. And that fuels you to make decisions without feeling overloaded. But what if you can't snooze because pesky thoughts are running in circles in your brain? Mindfulness training helps here, too. Try focusing on your breathing, counting backward, or singing a song in your head to quiet your mind and lull you into dreamland, Beilock says.

Don't Stop Believin'

When you're replaying a moment from your day, wondering if you did or said the right thing, or worried about the future, confide in and take advice from someone you look up to and trust, like a parent, coach, or mentor. While it's helpful to have someone rooting for you, a lucky charm can provide the same boost: In a German study, golfers who were given a "lucky" golf ball and told that others had performed extremely well with it hit the ball much better than those who weren't informed of that tidbit. Likewise, when you're contemplating a career change and fretting over everything that could go wrong, having faith that it will all just work out helps relieve some of the pressure that comes from feeling as though you have to be in control all the time.

Just Do It

Whether you're trying to hit a ball or rock a work assignment, don't dwell. "Just start a project rather than waiting and thinking about every aspect of it," Beilock recommends. "Focus on an outcome, the one goal you want to achieve. That prevents your mind from wandering to all the other things that could have an impact on your performance." In other words, you won't overthink it.

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