

# 'How can I stop overthinking everything?' A clinical psychologist offers solutions

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As a clinical psychologist, I often have clients say they are having trouble with thoughts "on a loop" in their head, which they find difficult to manage.

While rumination and overthinking are often considered the same thing, they are slightly different (though linked). [Rumination](#) is having thoughts on repeat in our minds. This can lead to overthinking—analyzing those thoughts without finding solutions or solving the problem.

It's like a vinyl record playing the same part of the song over and over. With a record, this is usually because of a scratch. Why we overthink is a little more complicated.

## **We're on the lookout for threats**

Our brains are hardwired to look for threats, to make a plan to address those threats and keep us safe. Those perceived threats may be based on [past experiences](#), or may be the "what ifs" we imagine could happen in the future.

Our "what ifs" are usually negative outcomes. These are what we call "[hot thoughts](#)"—they bring up a lot of emotion (particularly sadness, worry or anger), which means we can easily get stuck on those thoughts and keep going over them.

However, because they are about things that have either already happened or might happen in the future (but are not happening now), we cannot fix the problem, so we keep going over the same thoughts.

## **Who overthinks?**

Most people find themselves in situations at one time or another when they overthink.

Some people are [more likely](#) to ruminate. People who have had prior

challenges or experienced trauma may have come to expect threats and look for them more than people who have not had adversities.

Deep thinkers, people who are prone to anxiety or low mood, and those who are sensitive or feel emotions deeply are also more likely to ruminate and overthink.

Also, when we are stressed, our emotions tend to be stronger and last longer, and our thoughts can be less accurate, which means we can get stuck on thoughts more than we would usually.

Being run down or physically unwell can also mean our thoughts are [harder to tackle](#) and manage.

## **Acknowledge your feelings**

When thoughts go on repeat, it is helpful to use both emotion-focused and problem-focused [strategies](#).

Being emotion-focused means figuring out how we feel about something and addressing those feelings. For example, we might feel regret, anger or sadness about something that has happened, or worry about something that might happen.

Acknowledging those emotions, using self-care techniques and accessing [social support](#) to talk about and manage your feelings will be helpful.

The second part is being problem-focused. Looking at what you would do differently (if the thoughts are about something from your past) and making a plan for dealing with future possibilities your thoughts are raising.

But it is difficult to plan for all eventualities, so this strategy has limited

usefulness.

What is more helpful is to make a plan for one or two of the more likely possibilities and accept there may be things that happen you haven't thought of.

## **Think about why these thoughts are showing up**

Our feelings and experiences are information; it is important to ask what this information is telling you and why these thoughts are showing up now.

For example, university has just started again. Parents of high school leavers might be lying awake at night (which is when rumination and overthinking is common) worrying about their young person.

Knowing how you would respond to some more likely possibilities (such as they will need money, they might be lonely or homesick) might be helpful.

But overthinking is also a sign of a new stage in both your lives, and needing to accept less control over your child's choices and lives, while wanting the best for them. Recognizing this means you can also talk about those feelings with others.

## **Let the thoughts go**

A useful way to manage rumination or overthinking is "[change, accept, and let go.](#)"

Challenge and change aspects of your thoughts where you can. For example, the chance that your young person will run out of money and

have no food and starve (overthinking tends to lead to your brain coming up with catastrophic outcomes!) is not likely.

You could plan to check in with your child regularly about how they are coping financially and encourage them to access budgeting support from university services.

Your thoughts are just ideas. They are not necessarily true or accurate, but when we overthink and have them on repeat, they can start to feel true because they become familiar. Coming up with a more realistic thought can help stop the loop of the unhelpful thought.

Accepting your emotions and finding ways to manage those (good self-care, social support, communication with those close to you) will also be helpful. As will accepting that life inevitably involves a lack of complete control over outcomes and possibilities life may throw at us. What we do have control over is our reactions and behaviors.

Remember, you have a 100% [success rate](#) of getting through challenges up until this point. You might have wanted to do things differently (and can plan to do that) but nevertheless, you coped and got through.

So, the last part is letting go of the need to know exactly how things will turn out, and believing in your ability (and sometimes others') to cope.

## **What else can you do?**

A stressed out and tired brain will be [more likely](#) to overthink, leading to more stress and creating a cycle that can affect your well-being.

So it's important to manage your [stress levels](#) by eating and sleeping well, moving your body, doing things you enjoy, seeing people you care about, and doing things that fuel your soul and spirit.

Distraction—with pleasurable activities and people who bring you joy—can also get your thoughts off repeat.

If you do find overthinking is affecting your life, and your levels of anxiety are rising or your mood is dropping (your sleep, appetite and enjoyment of life and people is being negatively affected), it might be time to talk to someone and get some strategies to manage.

When things become too difficult to manage yourself (or with the help of those close to you), a therapist can provide tools that have been proven to be helpful. Some helpful tools to manage worry and your thoughts can also be found [here](#).

When you find yourself overthinking, think about why you are having "hot thoughts," acknowledge your feelings and do some future-focused problem solving. But also accept life can be unpredictable and focus on having faith in your ability to cope.

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