



Suicide
Prevention
Pathways

TALK SUICIDE

When “Overthinking” Becomes a Problem!

Sometimes we find ourselves in a situation where we start to replay a scenario, conversation etc over and over in our mind. Reflection in itself is a useful tool however it can quickly turn into ‘overthinking’ or ‘ruminating’, which can take a real toll on our mental health.

Below are a few simple strategies to consider the next time you start ‘overthinking’.

Awareness

First, notice when you’re overthinking. Are you going over and over something in your head? Is one thought repetitively spinning around in your brain but you are unable to make any progress or come to any resolution on the matter? That’s overthinking.

Sometimes we believe that if we just ponder a problem for long enough, we’ll be able to figure out a solution. However, there comes a point when our repetitive analysing can impair our thinking, drain our energy and affect our mental health.

Pause and look up

When we start overthinking things, look up. There’s a reason we look to the sky during contemplation. The simple act of looking up releases a chemical in our brain that helps us become more imaginative, more creative and more open to possibilities. Most importantly, noticing something outside of ourselves gets us out of our heads and brings us back to the present moment to help pause the overthinking cycle.

Ground Yourself

When you start overthinking, your reasoning/rationalising centre in your brain gets shut down. It is important to bring that area back into action so you can start to make sense of things again. Grounding yourself can help to do this.

Try taking 3 deep slow breaths (Breathe in through the nose for a count of 4, hold for 5, then breathe out through the mouth for 6). Put ALL your focus into WHERE you feel your breath as you do it (i.e., nostrils, mouth, throat, chest or stomach). Repeat.

Another quick exercise is to fully draw focus to your feet. Are they hot or cold, can you feel your socks or tightness from your shoes, can you squish your toes or rock back and forth from heel to toe. Walk on some cool grass or textured carpet and put all your focus into the sensation.

What would you say to a friend?

Pretend that a close friend of yours, rather than you yourself, is struggling with the issue. What words of advice would you give them? Often when we step back from a situation, we can see things more clearly and objectively and are less emotionally reactive.

Focus on taking the next, best action

Instead of letting your mind remain in a tailspin about imagined future scenarios, is there ONE small thing you could do to help the situation right now, no matter how small. If there is, do it!

If you have no control over the situation, then use your energy productively - write that email, clean your office or kitchen for 15 minutes, walk the dog or simply close your eyes and breathe slowly and deeply for a few moments.

Do What Brings You Joy

Distract your mind with something that usually brings you happiness, i.e., go for a walk, read a book, watch a movie, listen to music, play an instrument, play with your pet, call a friend for a chat, do some baking, draw, etc., whatever makes you feel better!

Change Your Perspective

How does the thing you're overthinking fit into the grander scheme of your life? Is it really that important? Will it be something that you will think about it one week's time, one month's time, or one year's time? Are you allowing a small issue to be blown out of proportion? Is it more important to keep overthinking this than your peace of mind, health, and happiness? Perspective is everything!

Practice Gratitude

It can be hard to find things to be grateful for when overwhelmed by worry. On a daily basis, make a list of five things for which you're appreciative. Try to vary what you write down, so you're not automatically jotting down the same items. Consider sharing your list with a friend, so you can encourage each other to look on the bright side.

Set a Limit

While it's helpful to take time to consider and reflect on the situation, becoming consumed with trying to do things "perfectly", or trying to avoid the work or uncomfortable feelings associated with a decision is counterproductive.

For relatively simple decisions, set a timer for 10 minutes, weigh your options, and come up with the best (not perfect!) decision, then act on it. For more complicated decisions, set a timer for 20 or 30 minutes a day (at most!) to think about the matter, then change the subject.

If you feel tempted to mull the issue over some more, remind yourself that your unconscious brain is working behind the scenes on your behalf, and that you can resume your problem-solving tomorrow (at the earliest).

Write out your thoughts

Put specific words to what is worrying you and why. Seeing this on paper (or a computer screen) can help you to see your concerns more clearly.

Once the words are on paper, you could take it that once step further and try writing out alternative 'positive' explanations and possibilities for your situation and worries (i.e., consider what could go RIGHT, rather than what could go wrong).

Taking it that one step further can lead to a potential perspective shift, hope and enthusiasm.

The Future is not the Past

Just because you may have made a mistake or fell short of expectations in the past, doesn't mean that you're doomed to fail the next time.

We need to be careful not to create a self-fulfilling prophecy simply because we have an apprehensive, overthought 'projection' of what the future may bring (often based on our anxiety!).

Fear-based predictions can sometimes lead you to attract failure based on your fear, and this can then spiral into more fear, hence the need to work hard at stopping the habit of overthinking.

Seek Help

Constant overthinking can be a sign of a deeper mood disorder (i.e., anxiety and depression). As we know, overthinking can impair your mental health, so it's a vicious cycle. If you find you are in a constant state of struggle, seek help by speaking with your GP or a qualified Practitioner to address what may be underlying your over-active thoughts.