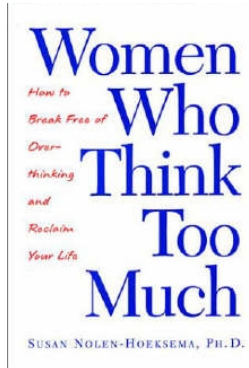




BestSummaries



WOMEN WHO THINK TOO MUCH

How to Break Free of Over-thinking And Reclaim Your Life

Author: Dr Susan Nolen-Hoeksema

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About the Author



Dr Susan Nolen-Hoeksema

"My research focuses on cognitive vulnerabilities to depression, and on the relationship of mood regulation strategies to vulnerability to depression and other mental health problems. Much of my research is on a construct I call rumination, the tendency to respond to distress by focusing on the causes and consequences of your problems, without moving into active problem-solving. In experimental and survey studies, we have found that people who ruminate in response to difficult circumstances have more severe and prolonged periods of depression and anxiety. Rumination appears to exacerbate negative thinking and interfere with good problem-solving. Ruminators are also more likely than nonruminators to engage in impulsive, escapist behaviors, such as binge drinking and binge eating. My most recent work in this area is attempting to determine what makes some forms of self-reflection adaptive, and what characteristics of people make them able to use adaptive self-reflection but avoid maladaptive self-reflection."

Wisdom in a Nutshell

Women today have more choices and opportunities, and are more in control of their lives. Despite this, many women suffer from the modern disease of overthinking the chronic cycle of uncontrollable negativity and moodiness that cause women to be unhappy, angry and helpless despite success and achievement.

Overthinking afflicts more women than men and may be one of the factors why women are twice as likely to develop depression as men. "Women Who Think Too Much" by Dr. Susan Nolen-Hoeksema explores what causes women to fall into the trap of overthinking and offers tested strategies on how to break free and live happier, more positive lives.

I. What Is Overthinking?

Overthinking is negative thinking magnified to the point where one loses control and is overwhelmed by one's thoughts. Overthinking may be triggered by a simple concern about a job, weight or family, an argument, an innocent comment from a friend or colleague, or anything that made a person feel sad, anxious or angry.

Instead of resolving the issue in mind, or moving on to other things, however, overthinking gives rise to more and more negative thoughts, often unrelated to the original problem. Mood gets deeper and darker, and one becomes more and more angry, sad, and worried. Thoughts go round and round until one concludes that the situation is hopeless and nothing can be done to improve it.

The “yeast” effect

Overthinking has a “yeast effect” on women's thinking. Women knead negative thoughts like dough until they rise to double their size. For example, if a client was not satisfied with one's work, one starts thinking of all the other clients who were not satisfied, and forget the many satisfied clients. Then one thinks she is not good enough. Thoughts then move to her spouse/partner, and wonder why he loves her when he could do so much better. A woman then questions her attractiveness, weight, health, etc until she sees herself as totally unworthy.

The “distorted lens” effect

Overthinking also has a “distorted lens” effect: women's problems become bigger, they focus on what is wrong or bad about our situation, and they see things as hopeless. Their child may get a bad grade in school or gets into trouble. Women start worrying that they are growing up badly. Worried women soon think of themselves as bad parents and feel certain that their children will end up badly. Then these women blame their own parents, and think there is no way to change the way they are.

Three types of overthinking

1. Rant-and-rave overthinking

The most familiar type, this usually arises from some

wrong one believes was done to her. She feels unjustly treated and obsesses about taking revenge. While she may be right in feeling offended, overthinking makes her see others as villains and prevents them from seeing their side. This can lead to impulsive, self-destructive acts of revenge. For example, getting rejected for a job leads an overthinker to see the evaluators as stupid or biased and think about suing the company for discrimination.

2. Life-of-their-own overthinking

In this type, a simple concern leads to an endless examination of negative causes and possibilities, each darker than the first. For example, an overthinker may start by wondering why she feels depressed and move on to thinking about having no friends, being overweight, being badly treated at work, and being unloved at home. All these negative thoughts appear true, even imaginary ones. This can lead to making bad decisions, such as fighting with a spouse or friends or quitting the job.

3. Chaotic overthinking

This is when all kinds of concerns and worries – even unrelated ones – flood an overthinker's mind. This can be paralyzing as one not sure what she really feels or think about anything. This can make some overthinkers take alcohol or drugs, just to drown out their thoughts.

What over-thinking is not

Overthinking is different from worrying. People worry about things that can/may happen or could go wrong. Overthinkers do much more than worry. They not only worry about the future, but also about the past. Worriers think something bad may happen; overthinkers are sure something bad has already happened.

Overthinking is also different from obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). People with OCD are obsessed about things or situations external to them, such as germs so they have to wash their hands repeatedly. They obsess about specific actions “Did I turn off the stove?” and other things that appear trivial or absurd to the rest of us.

Finally, overthinking is not “deep thinking”. It is healthy to be in touch with one's emotions, to examine actions

and motives to understand oneself better. Overthinking focuses on negative emotions and things that may or may not have happened. Overthinking is looking at life in a distorted, negative way.

Am I an overthinker?

Take this test to see how much of an overthinker you are.

1. I think about how alone I feel.
2. I think about my feelings of fatigue or achiness.
3. I think about how hard it is to concentrate.
4. I think about how passive and unmotivated I feel.
5. I think, "Why can't I get going?"
6. I go over and over a recent situation, wishing it had gone better.
7. I think about how sad or anxious I feel.
8. I think about all my shortcomings, failings, faults, and mistakes.
9. I think about how I don't feel up to doing anything.
10. I think, "Why can't I handle things better?"

If you answered "never or almost never" to all of the items, or "sometimes" to a few, then you know how to fight overthinking. If you answered "often" or "always" to more than a few, then you are prone to overthinking.

Effects of overthinking

Overthinking makes life harder, because problems seem bigger and more difficult to solve, and people respond more poorly to them. Overthinking hurts relationships, because it can drive away friends and loved ones and make one unable to find ways of communicating. Overthinking may even contribute to serious mental disorders such as depression, severe anxiety and alcohol abuse.

II. Why Do We Overthink?

There are two main explanations put forward on why people overthink the brain and contemporary culture.

The Overthinking Brain

A person's brain is organized such that all thoughts

are interconnected in nodes and networks. Thoughts about family may be in one network and thoughts about jobs are in another.

Thoughts are also connected to moods and emotions. Things or situations that aroused negative moods tend to be connected in one network while those that make a person feel happy are in another network.

While this interconnectedness of thought and feeling help people think more efficiently, it also makes people prone to overthinking. Negative moods tend to activate negative memories and thoughts, even those that are unrelated. If one overthinks while in a negative mood, the mind can get flooded with all sorts of negative associations. And the more a person overthinks, the easier it is for the brain to bring up negative associations.

Brain research also shows that damage or miswiring of certain parts of the brain can make a person more prone to overthinking and depression. This includes the prefrontal cortex, which is involved in emotion regulation, and the amygdala and hippocampus, which are involved in learning and remembering. This may partly explain why some people tend to overthink more than others.

The Overthinking Generation

Studies made by the author show that young and middle-aged people overthink more than older people (those over sixty-five) do. This may be because of four recent cultural trends:

1. Vacuum of values. People today have more choices but often lack the values or basis for making the right ones. People have been led to question everything their parents' values, religion, and social norms - such that they are left with nothing to base their choices on. Without values, a person questions his/her choices and always wonders if he/she made the right one. This can lead to overthinking.

2. Entitlement obsession. People today have an overdeveloped sense of entitlement. People believe they deserve to be happy, rich and successful and that no one has the right to stop them from getting what they deserve. People tend to focus more on not

getting what they deserve and what is holding them back rather than on what they do have. It also puts many in potential conflict with everyone else.

3. Compulsive need for quick fixes. People tend to rely more on quick fixes rather than taking the slowly working through problems. If one feels sad or dissatisfied, one looks for some quick solution, like taking prescription medication or alcohol, shopping, taking up a new sport, or some frenetic activity. In many cases, however, quick fixes only provide a temporary or even wrong solution.

4. Belly button culture. Popular psychology and culture encourages people to express themselves more and develop greater self-awareness. Many people tend to take this too far, however, becoming too self-absorbed and hyper-analyzing themselves and their emotions. Many concentrate too much on “staring at their navels” and pondering the meaning of every twist and turn in their feelings.

III. Why do women overthink more than men?

Research has yet to uncover any biological reason why women are more likely to overthink than men. Rather, research has shown that women overthink more than men because of social and psychological factors.

1. Women have more to overthink

While women's overall status in society has improved tremendously, they still have a long way to go to achieving full equality with men. Women can hold top positions in business and government, but still earn less than men and receive less respect and recognition at work and at home. While more men are helping with the housework, the majority of married women still carry the bigger share.

These are chronic strains in women's lives that can make them feel frustrated and helpless at improving their situation. Many women also do not recognize when they experience discrimination or abuse. Even when they do recognize it, women are unable to find the resources to break free. Instead, this makes them prone to overthinking their situation.

Women are also more likely than men to be victims

of sexual abuse and poverty. Poverty makes women more vulnerable to crime and violence, illness and death of children, financial insecurity, poor housing, etc. All of these give rise to stresses that lead women to overthink.

2. Women's self-definitions fuel overthinking

Women are more likely than men to define themselves based on their relationships with others. “I am the daughter of ____, the wife of ____, the mother of ____.” Women also tend to know more people at a deeper emotional level and are more attuned to the emotions of others.

While these tendencies can make women's lives richer and more meaningful, it also provides more fuel for overthinking. Women have more people to think and be concerned about. More importantly, women also tend to be overinvolved in other people, basing their self-worth on what others think or feel about them.

3. Women have more emotional awareness

Women experience and express emotions more than men partly because they are brought up to pay more attention to emotions. Parents tend to encourage daughters to express their emotions and discourage their sons. Parents also tend to talk to their daughters more than their sons. More importantly, parents tend to talk about their problems and worries to their daughters, which sends the message to girls that life is full of problems and unhappiness.

Many women also tend to encourage each other to overthink, engaging in prolonged, repetitive conversations about negative subjects. Rather than pushing each other to actively take steps to solve a problem, women tend to validate a friend's overthinking because they think this is the way to show support.

IV. Strategies for overcoming overthinking

To overcome overthinking, you must: one, break free from this negative cycle; two, move to higher ground where you can act instead of overthink; and three, avoid future traps that can set you back.

Breaking Free

Try these strategies to break free from the habit of overthinking:

1. Understand that overthinking is not your friend.

Don't think you are doing something right or gaining new insights when you overthink. Don't think it would be wrong to stop overthinking about the major issues in your life. Actually, overthinking only focuses you on what is wrong in your life, until your thoughts get out of control. So anytime you find yourself overthinking, tell yourself to stop.

2. Give it a rest.

Simply give your mind a rest by doing something pleasant to lift your mood, like exercise, reading, cooking or helping others. Though a pleasant distraction can only provide temporary relief, it can set the stage for longer-term strategies. However, avoid harmful distractions like overeating/bingeing or alcohol.

3. Get up and get moving.

Stop overthinking through activity and concentration. When you start overthinking in the middle of the night, get up and move about. If you lie in bed overthinking for more than 20 minutes, get up and leave the room. Don't think you will solve your problem by thinking about it all night. If there are places that trigger overthinking, change the look of the place.

4. Join the thought police

Create your own inner "Stop" sign for overthinking. Use this "Stop" sign in situations where you cannot leave the room or do something distracting, like when you are in a meeting. You can make or buy a STOP sign that you can pull out when you start to overthink, or mentally yell "Stop!" or another word.

5. Don't let the thoughts win

If you find yourself starting to overthink about a situation that's been bothering you, take control of your thoughts. Decide when you will really focus on the problem and how you will figure out a solution.

6. Put it in your date book

If you really find it hard to stop overthinking, schedule it. Set aside a time to think about the things

that worry you. This frees you up to do other things and you don't feel guilty about avoiding your problems. You may find that when the hour comes, your problems are not so serious or so real as you thought.

7. Hand it over

Studies show that religious and nonreligious people alike find prayer effective in breaking away from distress and overthinking. You can also try meditation. Meditation has been shown to help people suffering from severe physical and psychological problems like depression, cardiovascular disease and chronic pain. Even taking three deep breaths and concentrating on the air going in and out of your lungs can break overthinking.

8. Lean on others

Talk to a trusted friend or supportive family member. Be careful, though, that the person you talk to does not make you overthink more. Make sure your friends understand that you need them to pull you out of the cycle of overthinking and do something constructive.

9. Commit it to paper

Write down your thoughts. By putting your fears and issues on paper, you contain them and give them limits. This gives you a sense of control over them. Writing can also purge you of your negative thoughts and help you sort out the important issues from the trivial or irrational ones. Research shows that writing our deepest thoughts and feelings improves our physical and emotional health.

10. Seek your bliss and use it

Counteract overthinking by creating opportunities to experience positive emotion even while under stress. Research shows people cope better with painful and stressful situations (like dying of illness or loss of a loved one) when they can have positive moments. So if you start overthinking, do something positive. Get your hair done, take a bubble bath, watch a funny movie, play with children, etc.

Moving to higher ground

Simply breaking free from overthinking is not enough. You may find yourself avoiding thinking altogether or getting back into the habit. The next step is moving to higher ground by substituting concrete action to

overthinking. Improving your situation is the best way to overcome overthinking permanently.

1. Adjust your focus

Because overthinking distorts your vision and makes you see only what is wrong in your life, change your perspective. Stop seeing yourself as a victim who can't do anything to improve their situation. Believe in your ability to take control, decide on a course of action, and then do it. Then, instead of worrying about the consequences, be ready to take responsibility for your decisions and actions.

2. Feel your pain and then move on.

Don't question your emotions or think there is something wrong with you when we get angry or upset. Accept the emotion you are feeling at a given moment. But recognize also that your emotion need not dictate your action. If you feel anger, accept that you are angry, and that you have the right to be. This clears your mind to choose the best response to the situation, instead of blowing up or other knee-jerk reactions that can be harmful to you and others.

3. Keep it simple (At least initially)

When we overthink, we see problems that don't really exist, or are less serious than we think. This is more likely to happen when we are upset but don't know why. If you find yourself doing this, think about the simple reasons first instead of flooding your mind with negative thoughts. Perhaps the reason for your bad mood is simply that you are hungry or tired or did not get enough sleep. The simple solution may be to take a nap, get a bite or get busy with something.

4. Stop comparing yourself

We all tend to compare ourselves with others. Overthinkers do this to the extent that their opinions of themselves depend more on how they compare with others. If you overthink about how you compare with others, ask yourself if it really matters, or if you really want what the other person has and if you can't be satisfied with what you have.

5. Stop waiting to be rescued

Many of us feel trapped in bad marriages, bad jobs

or other bad situations and think about what might have been if had made different choices. If you are in a bad situation, you need to recognize that you basically have two options: accept it or change it. And only you can do this for yourself. So instead of waiting for someone or something else to change your situation, change it yourself.

6. Let them flow

Once you recognize that you can change your situation, brainstorm and make a list of options and possible solutions to a problem. Then think about each of them, weed out the impractical or unrealistic ones, and decide on the best course of action.

7. Raise your sights

Overthinking makes you focus on the details of what you or others said, felt or did. To fight this, set aside time to really think about what values are important to you. Being clear about your values prevents you from getting bogged down in unimportant details and lets you see more clearly what actions to take in life.

8. Just do something (small)

Even when you decide to act to resolve a problem or situation, it may be difficult to take the first step. A good way out of immobility is to do something small and manageable. This increases your confidence, energy and motivation for the bigger steps you have to take.

9. Go with it

Nonoverthinkers can accept that their actions may be wrong or fail or won't get good results, but take a shot anyway. Overthinkers become paralyzed by uncertainty and fail to take action. If you find yourself overthinking and unable to take action for fear of the consequences, just tell yourself to go with it.

10. Lower your expectations

Much of our overthinking is about other people's behavior. You think about why your child is not doing well in school, why your spouse is not more supportive, how your boss treats you badly. To fight this, accept that other people are different and do not always behave according to our expectations. This frees you from overthinking other people's actions and motives.

11. Forgive and move on

Overthinkers often ask "How could she/he/they do that

to me?” and brood over all the people (parents, boyfriends/girlfriends, bosses, friends) that have wronged them. Or, they might blame themselves excessively for past actions, real or otherwise. Learn to forgive yourself and others as a critical step to overcoming overthinking and taking action to improve your life.

12. Listen for other people's voices

Overthinking is often triggered by “the tyranny of the shoulds,” things other people say we should do. Often the voices women hear say you must be nice to everybody, make everyone happy, and keep your relationships at all costs. When you overthink in this way, ask yourself “Who is really speaking”? Who says you should be more attractive, lose weight, or be more successful? Challenge the voices in your head and choose the ones you really want to listen to.

Avoiding future traps

As with any bad habit, you can get rid of overthinking, but find yourself falling from your higher ground, due to a new dilemma or problem. If you start overthinking again, try these strategies:

1. Don't go there

Know your weak spots or triggers to overthinking and avoid situations that give rise to them. It can be interpersonal conflict, lack of achievement, etc. Of course, avoidance may not always be possible or even healthy because it can make us miss opportunities. So weigh the potential risk of overthinking with the possible benefits of a particular situation.

2. Plug the holes

Overcome our weaknesses because these often trigger overthinking. This can entail taking courses on improving our job-related skills (if we used to overthink about our professional competence) or dealing with substance abuse, or controlling anger.

3. Let go of unhealthy goals

Let go of unhealthy goals that only set you up for failure and overthinking. These are goals that are impossible or unrealistic and are imposed by other

people's expectations. Examples are: making everyone happy, looking like a magazine model, trying to save a marriage because we cannot see ourselves as anything but a happily married person.

To have healthy goals, go for what you really want, not those dictated by others; make sure they are realistic and feasible; and prioritize conflicting goals (e.g. career and family). Focus on achieving success instead of avoiding failure.

4. Be gentle with yourself

When we overthink, we often beat ourselves up with guilt, shame, anger, worry, etc. It is important then to build in positive emotional experiences in our daily life. Do not wait until you are distressed or overthinking. Choose activities that lift you up, like exercise, sports, art or handicraft. Do something good for yourself. You will feel better and more in control

5. Find your story

Often, overthinking is our way of seeking an explanation as to why we are who we are, how we got to where we are, why certain things happened to us. This is especially true when our lives are not going well. Overcoming overthinking, for the long term, then, means finding an answer to these questions and being able to accept who we are. You can turn to psychotherapy or religion/spirituality.

6. Broaden your base

People who base their self-concept on just one role are more vulnerable to overthinking, such as women who see themselves solely as mothers. When problems arise, they threaten our entire self-concept. Increase your sources of self-esteem, develop skills or pleasures, and widen your circle of friends. So, when something goes wrong in one area, you have other roles and people to draw strength from and maintain a more balanced sense of self.

7. Create a new image of yourself

We often overthink those aspects of ourselves that we are least confident about, like our weight, looks, etc. We overthink our mistakes, or incidents that showed us at our worst. We develop an image of ourselves as incompetent, fat, etc. Replace these negative images with positive ones by forgiving yourself and doing the other strategies mentioned.