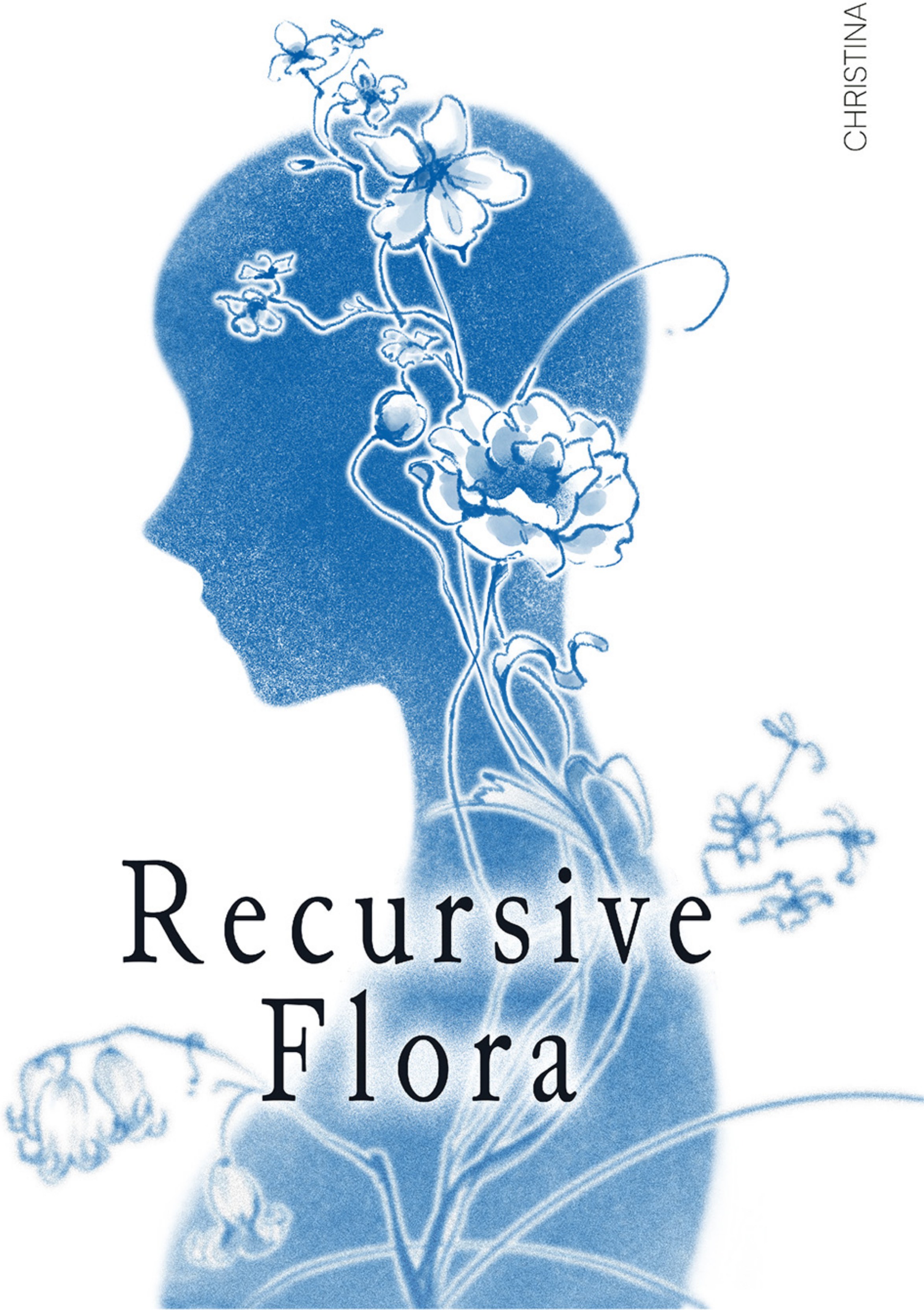
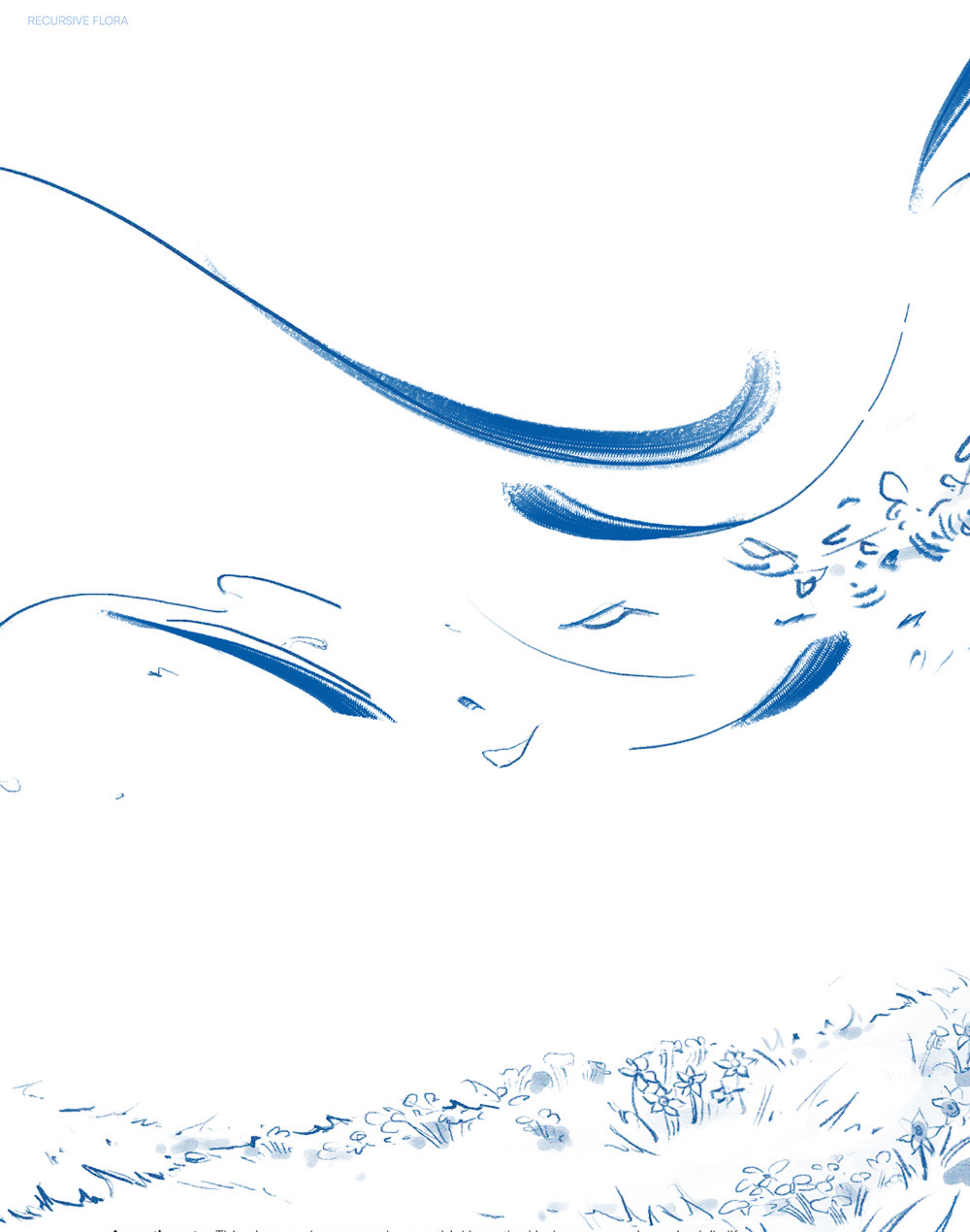
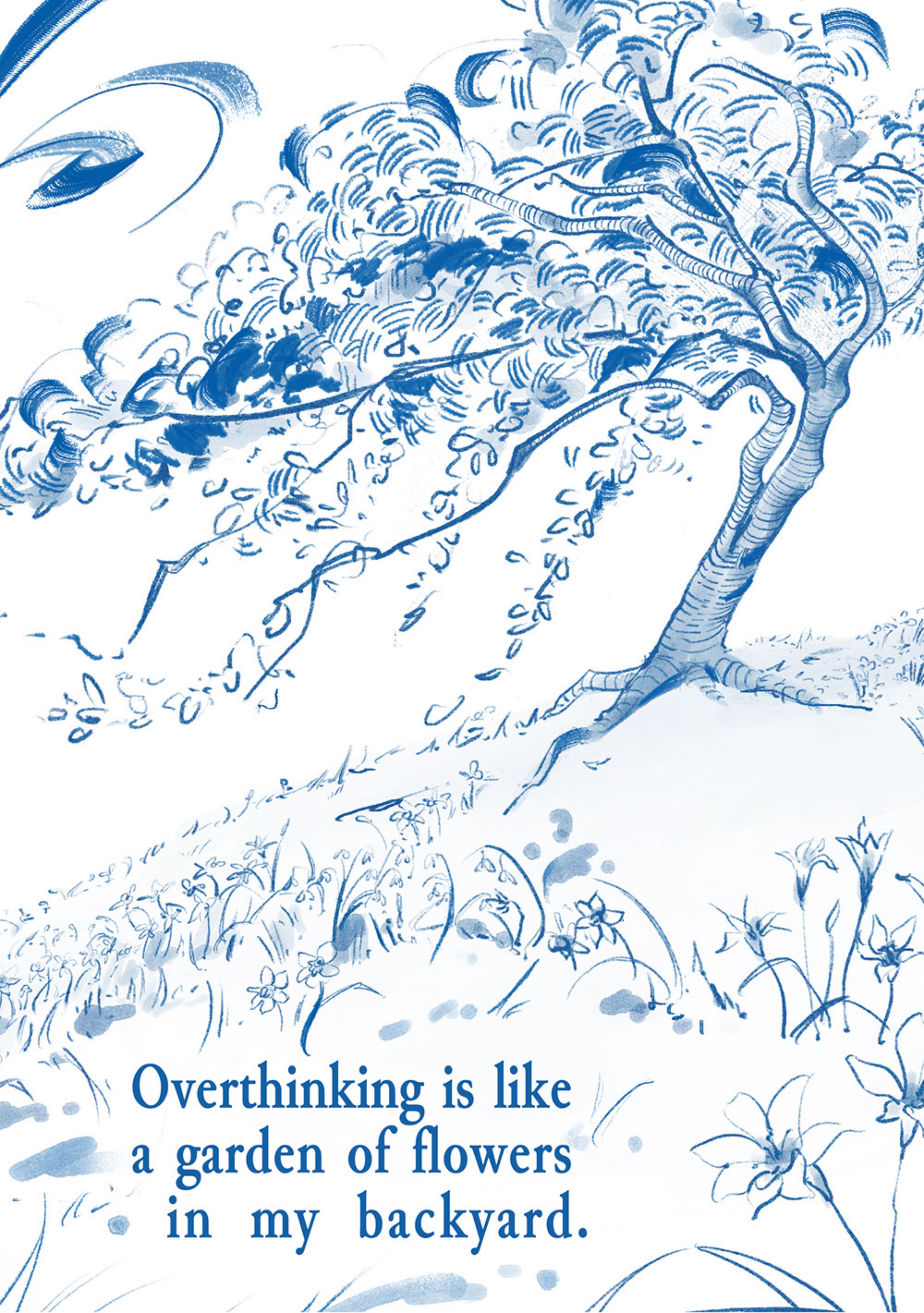


Recursive Flora

CHRISTINA LU



A gentle note: This piece explores everyday overthinking—the kind many experience in daily life. Some forms of repetitive thought, like those related to obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), may involve clinical patterns that benefit from specialized care. If your thoughts ever feel invasive, overwhelming, or out of your control, consider reaching out to a mental health professional for support.



Overthinking is like
a garden of flowers
in my backyard.

Thoughts can bring me joy and decorate my life.

If they want to meet up, they'll let me know. I'll do my thing until then!

I got some good feedback yesterday, I'm excited to use it today!

I'm sad I'm moving cross-state but at least I get to go on new adventures!

My travel itinerary took up so much time to plan but it should be fun!

Other thoughts are stressful and unwanted.

Finally got a promotion. Do they secretly think I don't deserve it?

They said 'maybe' to coffee. Is it because I didn't join last time?

Everyone seemed so relaxed. Was I too much? Too stiff?

Why was he looking at me that way? Was it something I said?

Tending to my garden of thoughts
helps me process my world.

CHRISTINA LU

Not All Spirals Are the Same

Overthinking tends to be understood in a few ways:

- Ruminating about the past, thinking of the causes, meanings, and consequences of a negative experience.[1]
- Worrying about future potential threat, uncertainties, risks, and preparing for the worst.[2]
- Getting stuck in indecision, overanalyzing or diving too deep to the point of excess.[3]

Overthinking doesn't just disrupt our peace of mind; it also shapes how we relate to others and move through the world. Not only can it be stressful and anxiety-inducing, it's hard to stay present when our minds are busy scanning what isn't actually in front of us.

And yet, overthinking isn't always a problem. In some contexts, repetitive thought about difficult experiences can lead to recovery, future planning, and healthier habits.[4]

The distinction often lies between abstract and concrete thought. Abstract thinking—asking why something happened—can get us stuck on the same thought without resolution. Concrete thinking—asking what happened and what we can do next—moves us forward. It's specific, contextual, and focused on the actions we can take.[5]

It's easy to look at concrete thinking as the best form of thought; but after a success, or when we're in a stable emotional state, reflecting on the "why" can actually improve motivation and clarify direction. The impact of overthinking is rarely straightforward, and people's perceptions of its usefulness vary.

In 152 survey responses* (147 self-identified overthinkers and 5 non-overthinkers) and six interviews** gathered for this project, experiences spanned the spectrum. Some saw no benefit at all in their overthinking. Others framed it as conscientiousness or as a signal of deeper needs. Some craved actionable reframing; others sought structure, or physical release through movement or art.

But a common thread ran through all the feedback: overthinking often served as part of the journey toward resolution found at one's own pace, when ready to face it.

I don't love all my thoughts, but uprooting them too soon might take the good ones with them. So I watch and wait.

I'll know when to make space.

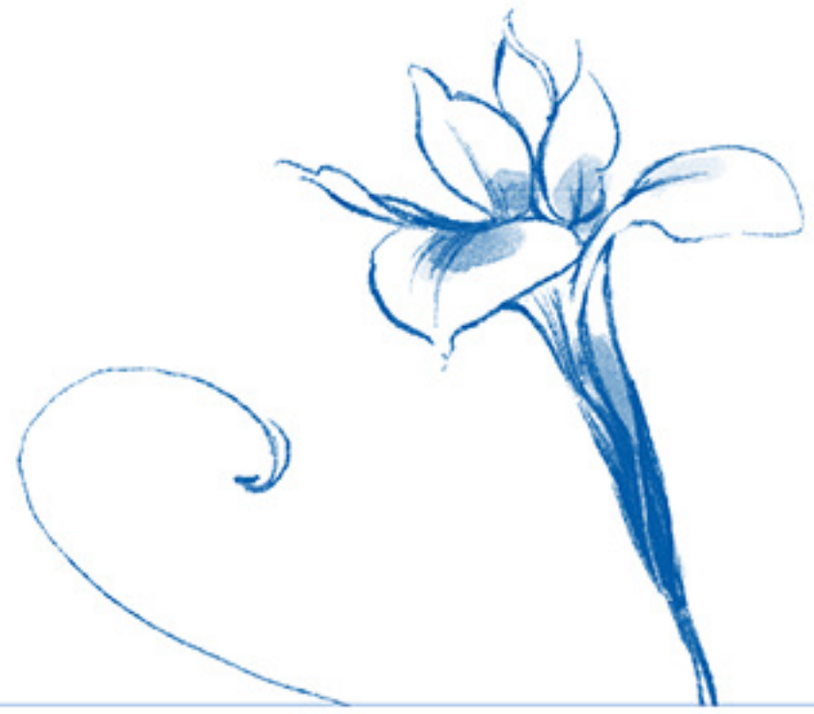
Thought #76 budded as I walked the edge of the ocean.

Thought #414 bloomed as I braced for everything that could go wrong, but chose to speak up anyway.

Thought #105 sprouted when I stayed silent, even though the weight of the situation was hard to carry alone.

Thought #6123 emerged when I saw preferential treatment at work and took it as proof I'd messed something up.

Thought #25458 flourished when I finally started working out, after spending months comparing myself to a friend.



Wanted or not, these flowers are mine to tend. They stemmed from my mind, after all.

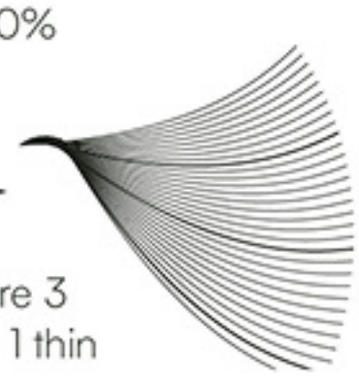
Starting Points

Overthinking rarely stems from a single cause. In total, 147 people selected an average of 2.48 factors each. People who selected multiple triggers appear in more than one group.

Legend

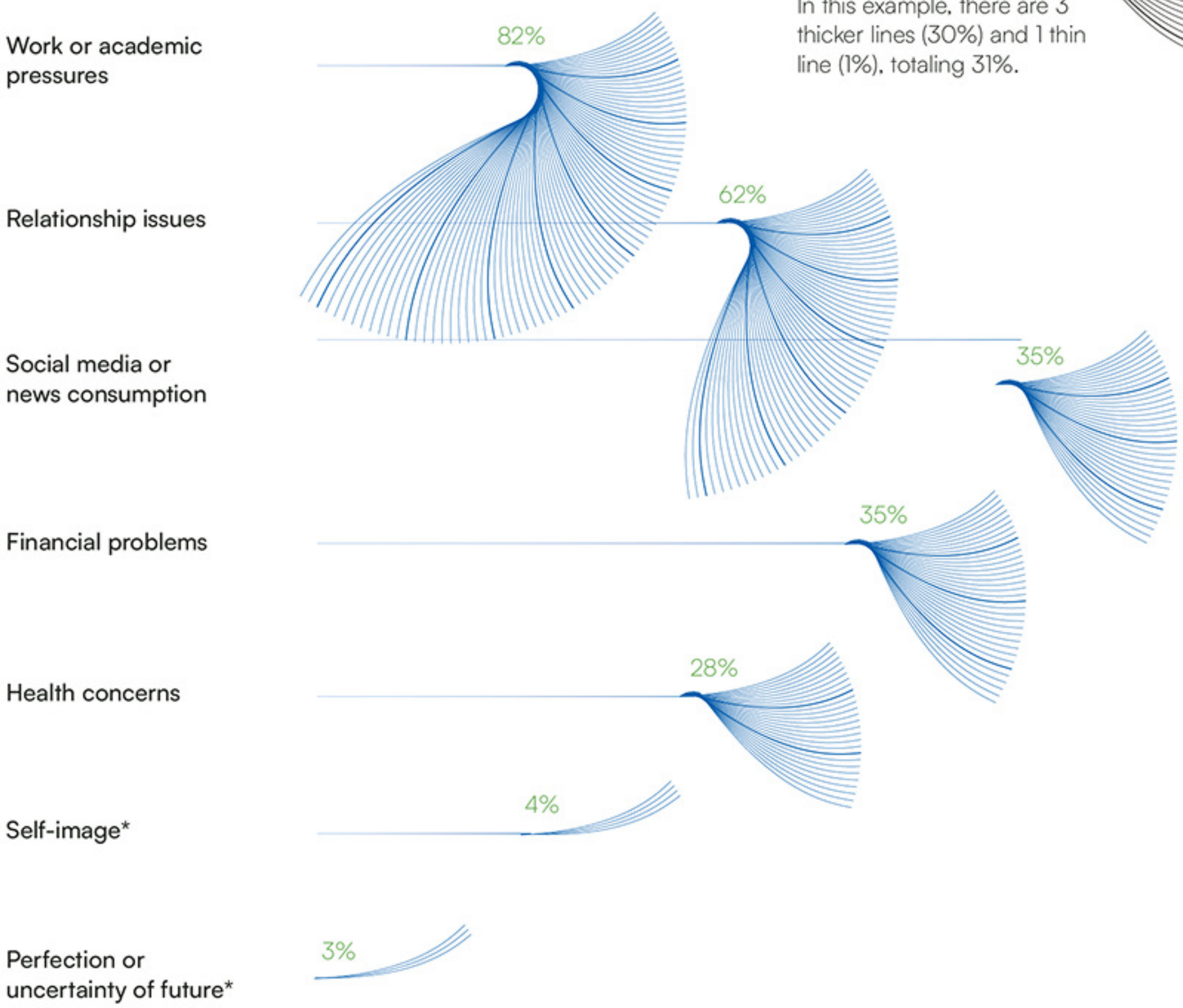
Lines = % respondents
Thin lines = every 1%
Thicker lines = every 10%

Example



In this example, there are 3 thicker lines (30%) and 1 thin line (1%), totaling 31%.

Fig. 1: Factors Leading to Overthinking



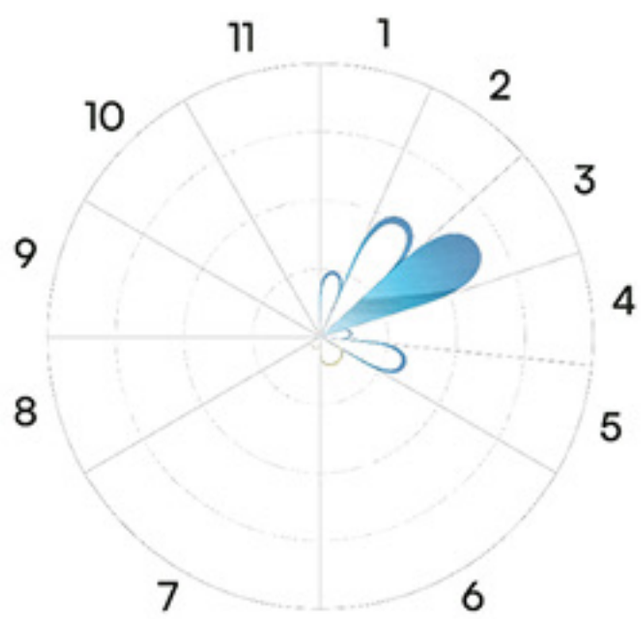
Sometimes the distress doesn't come from the initial thought (like in Fig. 1), but from noticing that we're thinking, then trying to stop, then failing and spiraling further. It becomes a feedback loop: the harder we try to escape it, the more stuck we feel.[6] But what does that actually feel like? Emotional experience can vary widely, even among people who overthink for similar reasons.

Describing the Feeling

Fig. 2: Overthinking Metaphors

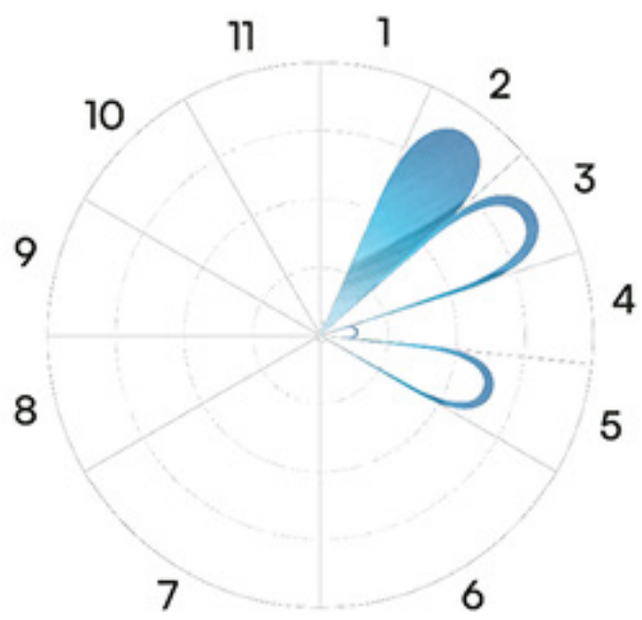
73 survey respondents shared what overthinking feels like to them. Each diagram corresponds to a specific metaphor within their category. To explore the full set of metaphors, scan the QR code.

Loss of Agency



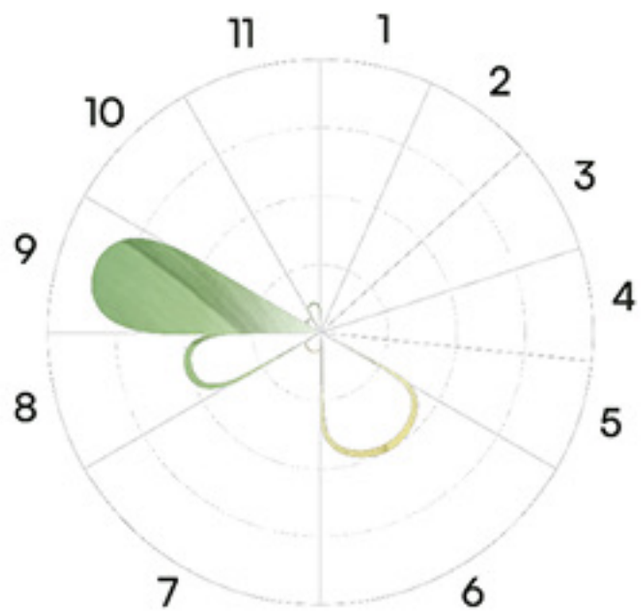
"Starts out like a sauna. And then it becomes super hot super fast. The door to the sauna room all of a sudden is locked from the outside."

Thought Entanglement

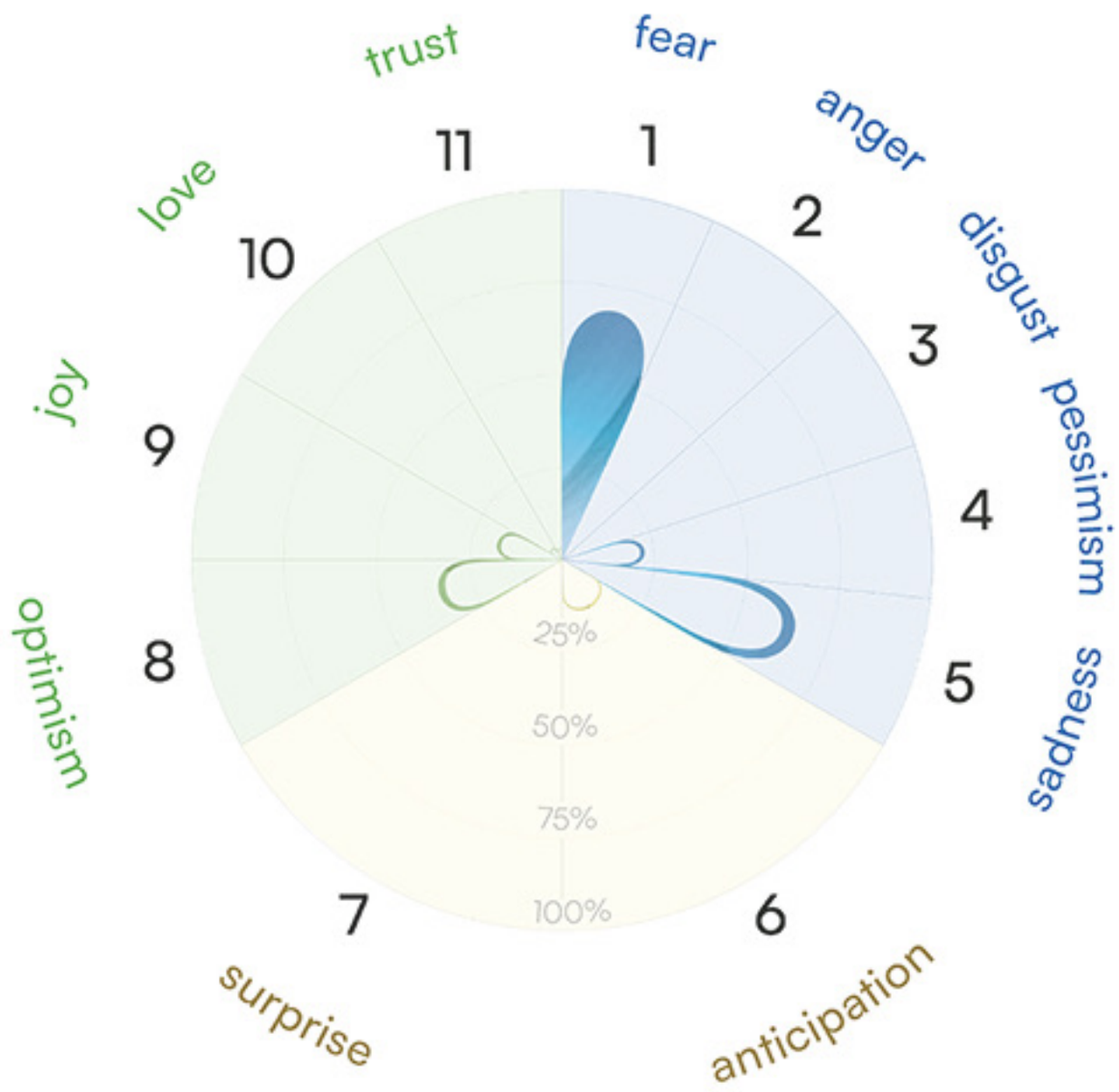


"A ball of yarn. You know the beginning and the end are there somewhere, but getting there is frustrating and takes ages. Also, others just tell you to buy a new one"

Sensory Overwhelm



"a band with 100 instruments playing"



Example

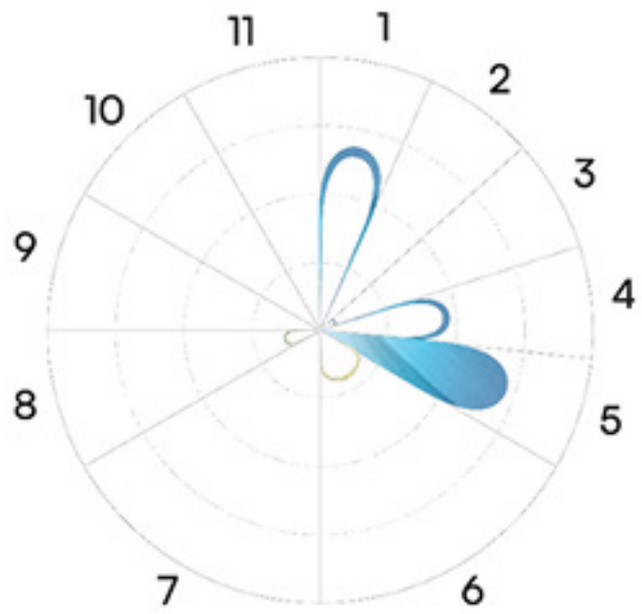
While the flower is primarily characterized by negative emotions—particularly fear—certain areas exhibit positive and neutral emotional tones.

Legend

Petal length = % emotion
Solid petal = most dominant emotion
Outline petal = other emotions
Numbered slices = specific emotion

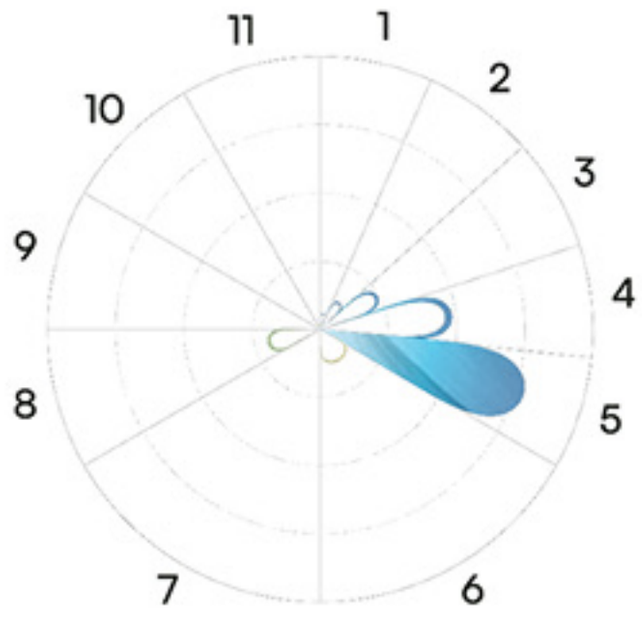
Colour = emotional valence
Blue = negative
Yellow = neutral
Green = positive

Perpetual Looping



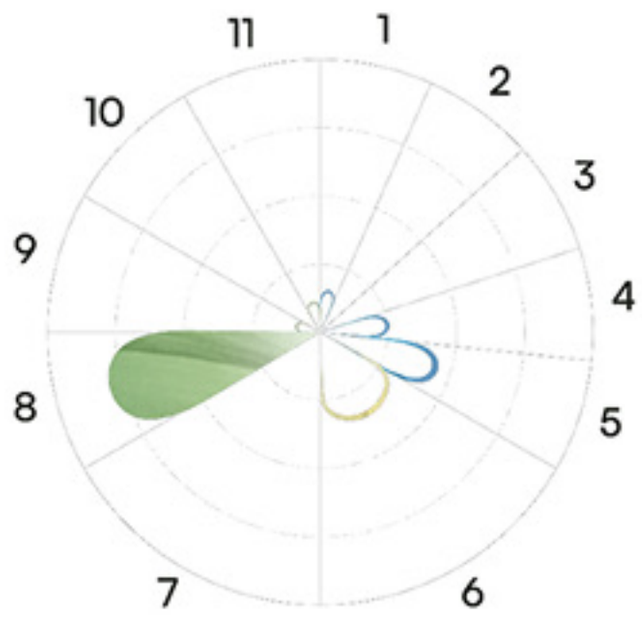
"kind of like being lost at sea - difficult to navigate through the waves (thoughts consume me and I keep producing new ones based off assumptions made off of my other overthinking thoughts?)"

Temporal Disconnection



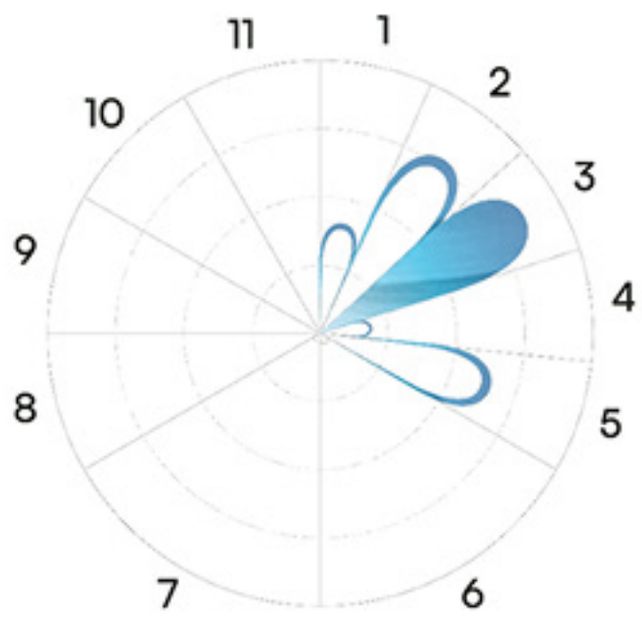
"World is moving but I'm not moving along with it"

Perceptual Barriers



"It feels like being in a smoky space, with many voices coming from my heart, but I can't see my true desires and needs clearly.I will try to sort it all out until my vision becomes clear and I understand my guiding ideology. This is usually very energy consuming."

Emotional Dysregulation



"loads of trains going in the same direction at the same time (bound to crash), a lift where people keep getting on even though it's uncomfortably full and hard to breathe"

A Multisensory Experience

While 85% of 147 respondents feel overthinking in their thoughts, many people experience it in other ways too. Most people described overthinking to affect a combination of areas.

The feeling matrix shows the top five most common combinations. The largest group—those who feel it in their thoughts, emotions, relationships, and body—makes up 19% of responses. Any remaining combination was chosen by fewer than 5% of respondents individually, but make up 21% of responses altogether.

Legend

Flower bars (blue) = % people who selected each individual area (regardless of combinations).

% of people (yellow) = proportion of people who selected this specific combination of areas.

Areas felt (green) = Each row represents one combination of areas where overthinking is felt. Filled dots show which areas are included; empty dots show which are not.

Area Definitions

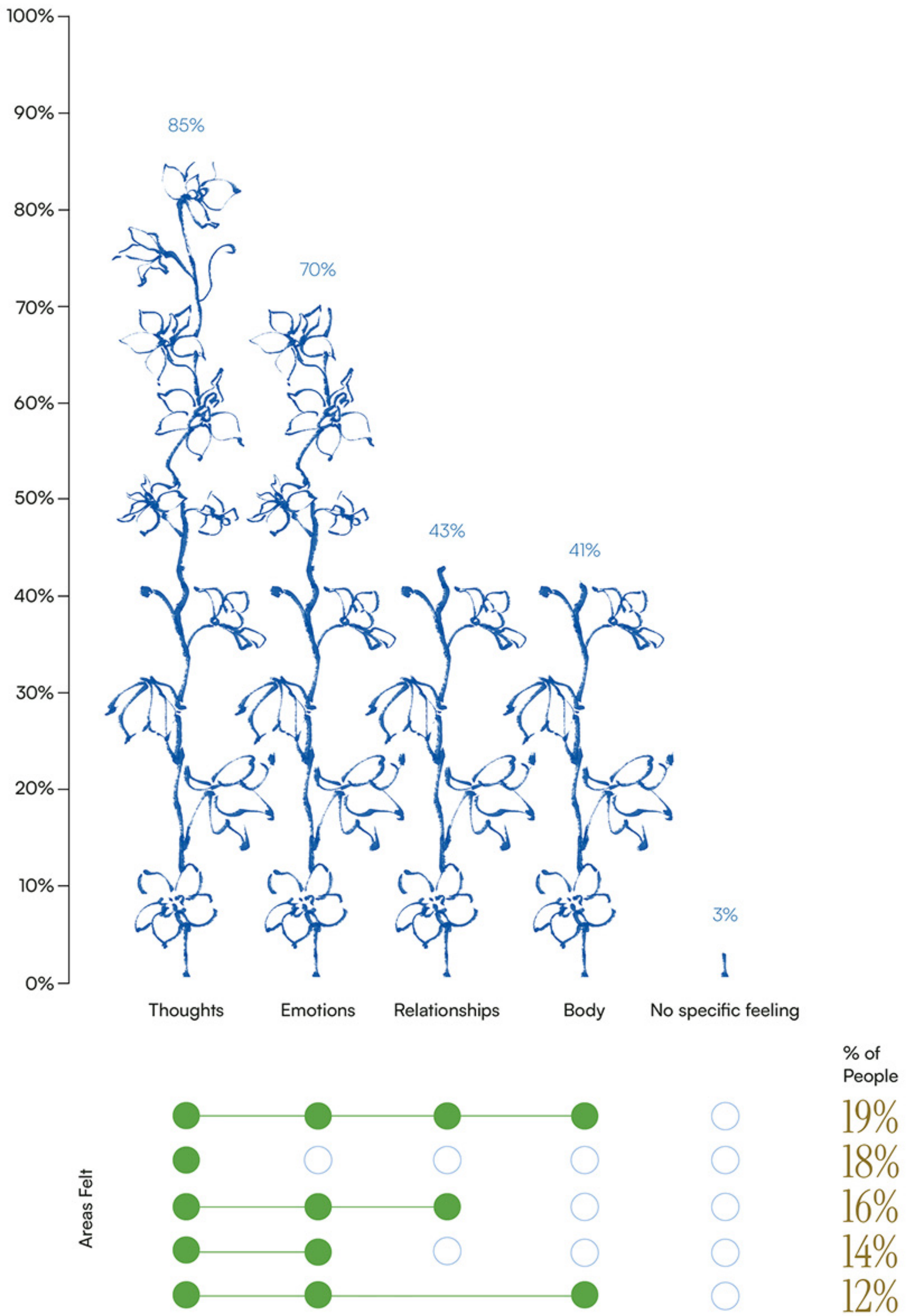
Thoughts: loops, racing mind, can't stop analyzing
Emotions: anxiety, dread, guilt, sadness
Relationships: overexplaining, withdrawing, conflict
Body: tension, headaches, fatigue, restlessness

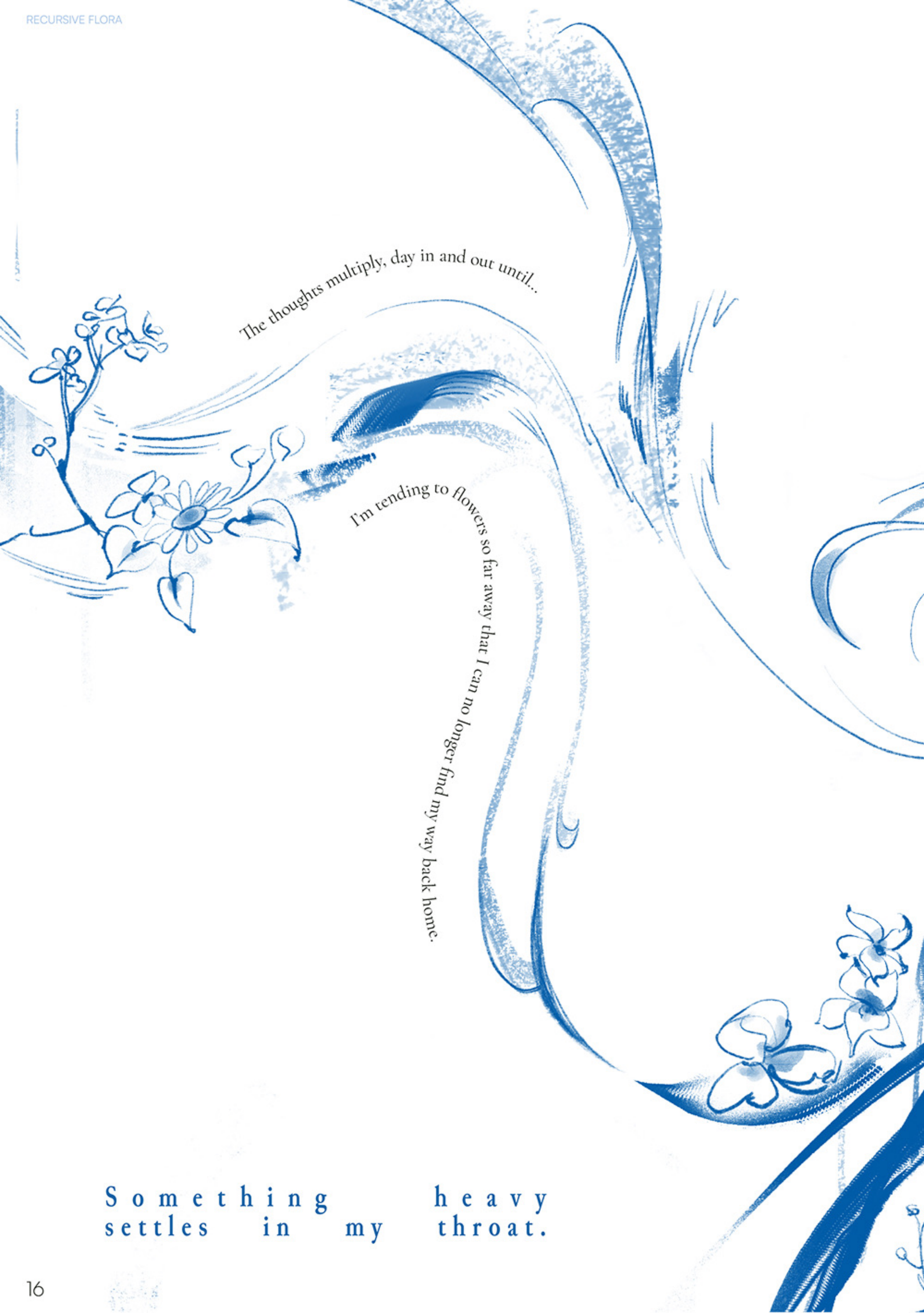
People often assume overthinking always starts in the head, but not everyone experiences it that way. Just as people have different reasons for why they overthink (Fig. 1) and different metaphors to describe it (Fig. 2), people may feel it in different areas of their being (Fig. 3).

Still, certain triggers made it more likely for people to feel overthinking in predictable ways:

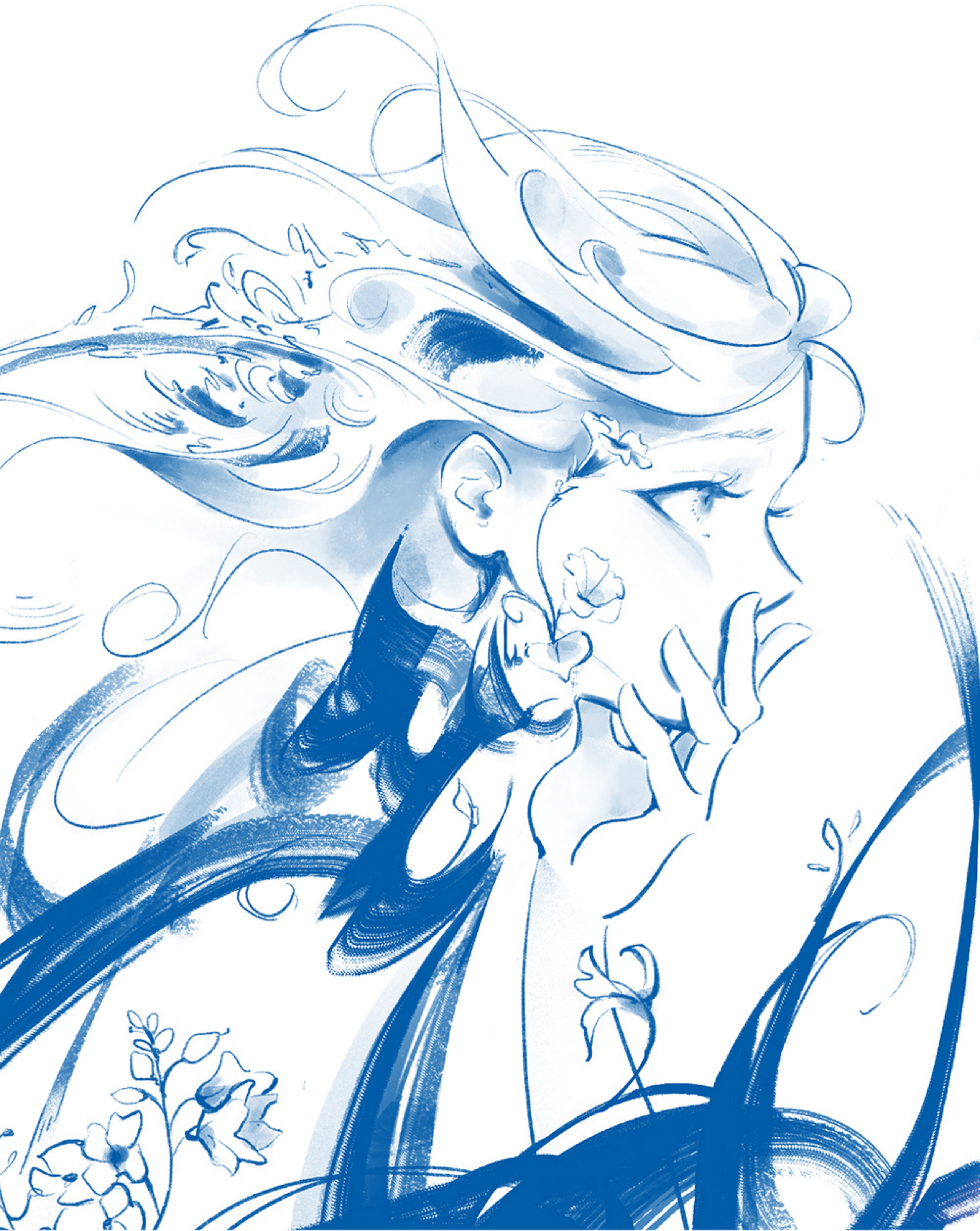
- **Relationship issues:** People who say relationships cause their overthinking are 4x more likely to feel it in their emotions and in their relationships.
- **Social media or news:** Those who cite media consumption are over 5x more likely to feel overthinking in their emotions, and 3x more likely to feel it in their bodies.

Fig. 3: Perceived Impact of Overthinking





Something heavy
settles in my throat.



Embodied Thought

When we overthink, the body doesn't wait for proof that something's wrong—it reacts like we're already in danger. Heart rate climbs. Breath shortens. Muscles tense. The sympathetic nervous system, which prepares us to fight or flee, activates even when the threat is just in our heads.[7]

This isn't just stress. Overthinking can interfere with how the body manages stress over time, making it harder to return to a calm baseline.[8] Physical responses like elevated heart rate and blood pressure stick around longer than they should. Over time, this throws off the system that regulates stress hormones and leaves the body feeling off-balance.

But it doesn't stop there, because just as thoughts affect how our bodies feel, our bodies influence the decisions we make, flagging good and bad choices before the mind can even explain them.[9] Unconscious biases can guide behaviour before any conscious knowledge is formed. These context-specific bodily reactions are also theorized to influence choices more than fixed personality traits in situations involving indecision.[10]

So while overthinking often gets dismissed as an imaginary state of mind, it's tangible and neurological.

People who ruminate show more activity in the amygdala—even when they're just looking at neutral images.[11] Their brains interpret ordinary moments as emotionally loaded. They may not choose to take things personally, their nervous system already has.

Maybe this is why when we overthink, we sometimes feel it externally. Sensing discomfort in the head might feel self-explanatory, but some of us can feel it in other parts of our bodies too (see Fig. 4).

My thoughts are stuck between my stomach and my mouth.
My body holds them, tight, even when I want to let them go.

Can I even say what I mean?

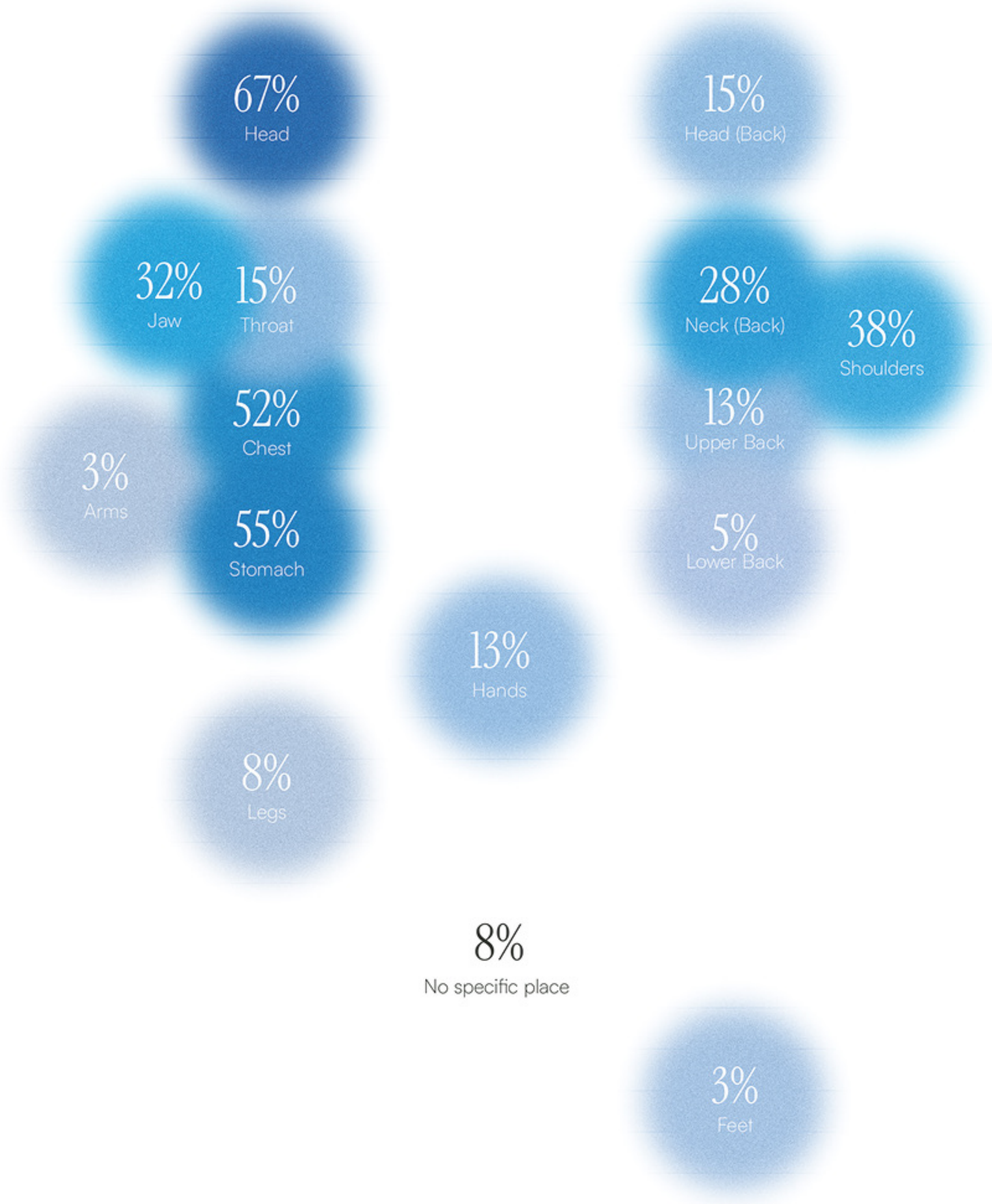
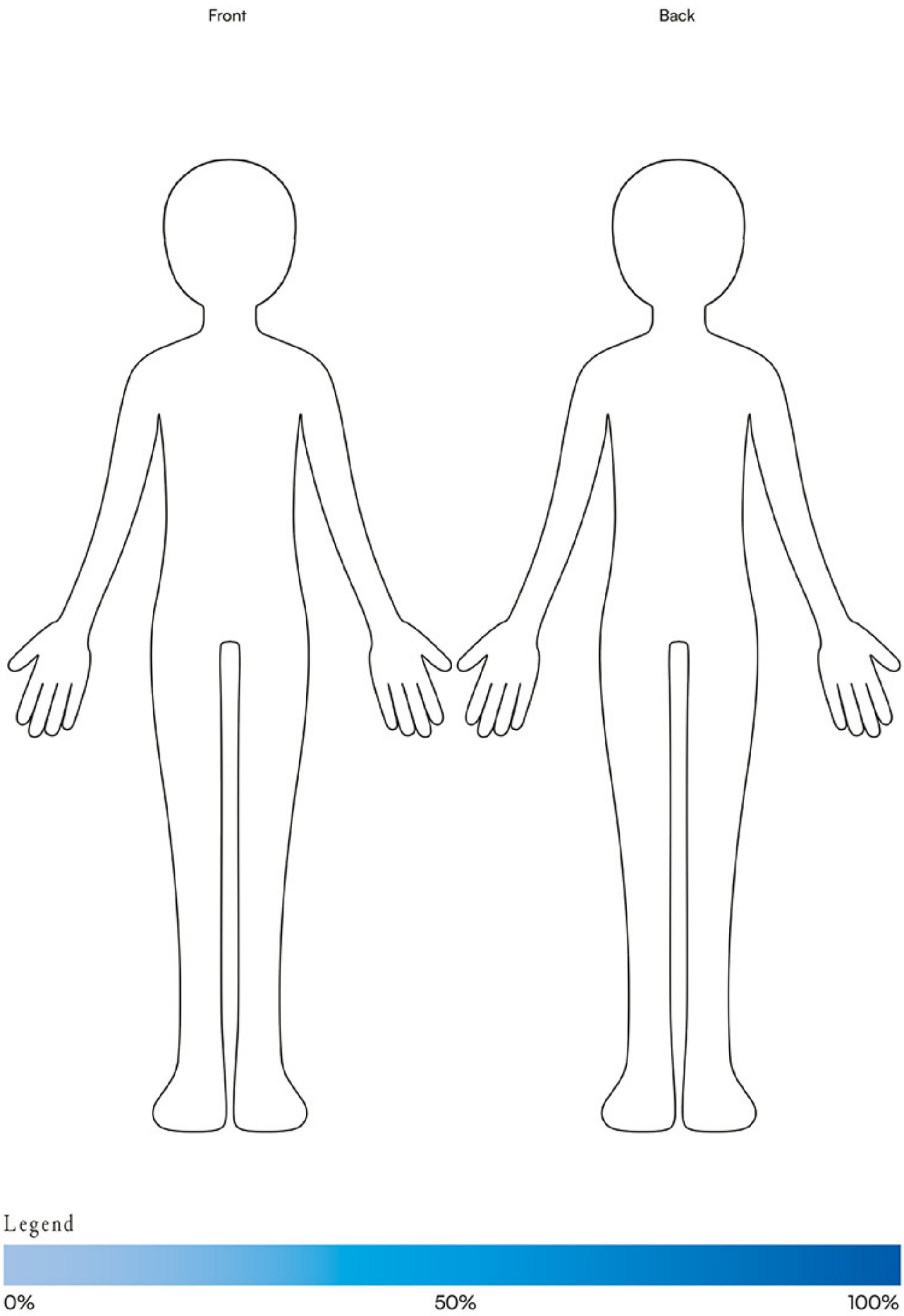

67%
Head
15%
Head (Back)
32%
Jaw
15%
Throat
28%
Neck (Back)
38%
Shoulders
52%
Chest
13%
Upper Back
3%
Arms
55%
Stomach
5%
Lower Back
13%
Hands
8%
Legs
8%
No specific place
3%
Feet

Fig. 4: Where Overthinking is Felt Physically in the Body



While overthinking is often framed as a mental habit, our bodies bear the weight too. 40% of 147 respondents said their overthinking causes physical discomfort. Of the 60 people who answered, most people felt overthinking in their heads and stomaches.

Why can't I stop thinking?

Why can't I stop thinking?

Why can't I stop thinking?

Why can't I stop thinking?

Why can't I stop thinking?

Why can't I stop thinking?

I go over these thoughts again and again, hoping one of them would finally take me home.

But the more I think, the more flowers grow.
I tell myself to breathe. To see things clearly.

But I can't help it.

But I can't help it.

But I can't help it.

But I can't help it.

But I can't help it.

Soon enough, I'm just circling–
lost in the garden I grew myself.

A Protective Mindset

I've tried to clear the mess.
Some thoughts I wanted gone.
But the roots ran deep.
Even if I'm done with them,
they're not done with me.

One way to see overthinking is as a response to feeling stuck, like there's a glass wall between us and what we want to reach. The discomfort builds until we finally accomplish what we're after, or decide to let it go.[12]

But when the goals we're chasing aren't internally meaningful, and we pursue something out of guilt, shame, or pressure, progress slow to a crawls. That's because our fears don't offer a clear path forward. Focusing on the finish line without mapping the way often leaves us stuck—looping around ideas that don't lead anywhere.

Perfectionism tightens that loop.[13] The higher the bar, the more relentless the self-questioning. Small missteps become reasons to replay the day. Add to this the cultural script that insists happiness is the only acceptable state, and even a passing sadness can feel like a personal failure.[14] The more we chase happiness as a finish line, the further we drift from things that can bring us peace.

Overthinking becomes a habit we do to soothe anxiety. The body, unable to distinguish between a thought and a real threat, tenses up: heart quickens, shoulders tighten, sleep slips away.[15] The brain's threat response makes it harder to disengage from the loop, which is why people often say, "I can't help it, I just feel this way."

This cycle is fed by the mind's own habits. We all tend to look for evidence that confirms what we already believe.[16] So when we're stuck in an overthinking loop, our brains start picking out the things that match the mood—worries, memories, worst-case scenarios. Not because they're the most accurate, but because they feel the most familiar. Once the mind latches on, it's hard to pull it away.

People I spoke with described their relationships to overthinking. One wished for an "off switch;" a way to silence the noise. Another didn't mind the complexity or depth that came with overthinking, they just wanted to lose the anxiety that engulfed it. Others described it like a tool for insight, a way of understanding the world more fully.

Regardless, sometimes the shift out of this mindset begins by listening for what our minds are trying to protect beneath all the noise; but it's easier said than done.

Which way?

y do I go?

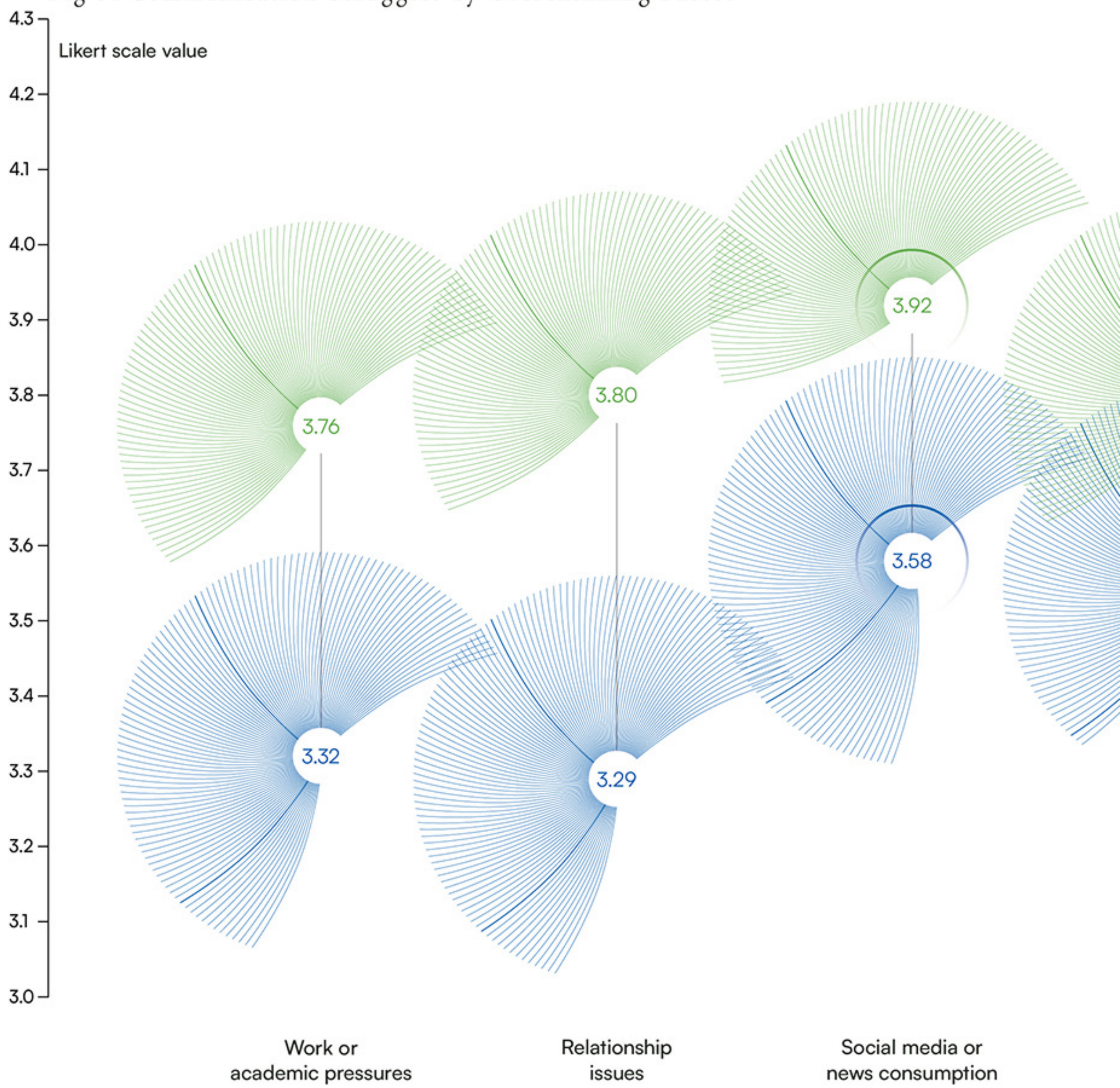
I'm afraid to ask.

Unspoken Desires

147 people shared how hard it is to talk about overthinking and whether they wish others understood them. Both questions were rated on a 1-5 Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Because most ratings leaned toward agreement, the y-axis is truncated, starting at 3, to better show group differences.

The chart groups responses by reasons for overthinking. On average, participants selected 2.48 reasons, so some appear in multiple categories. Those who overthink due to social media or news reported higher difficulty opening up and a strong desire for understanding. Other causes showed no consistent pattern.

Fig 5: Communication Struggles by Overthinking Factor



Legend

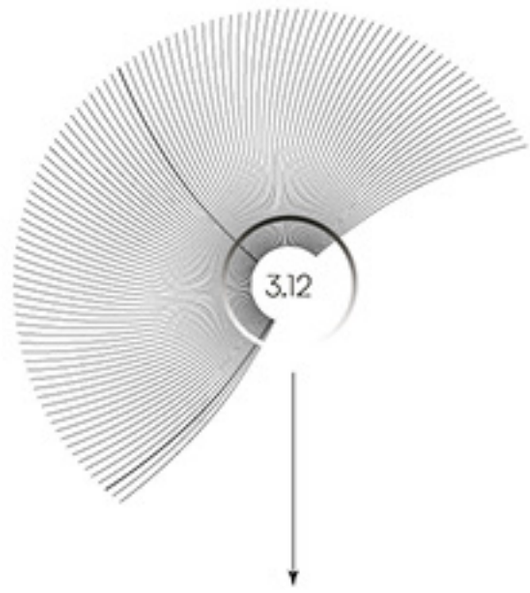
Blue = difficulty talking about overthinking

Number = average likert (1-5)

Gradient circle = represents items with significantly higher average agreement on the Likert scale, compared to other groups.

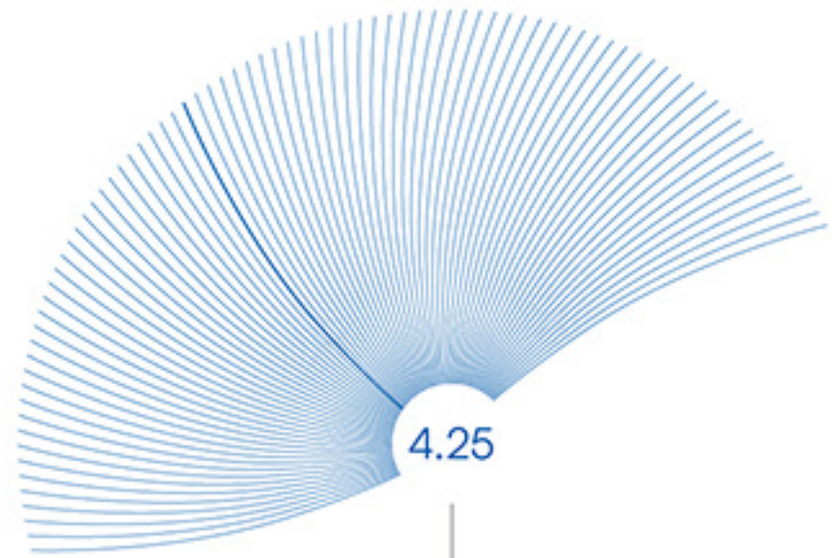
Lines = standard deviation
Thin lines = every 0.10 standard deviations
Thicker lines = every 0.50 standard deviations

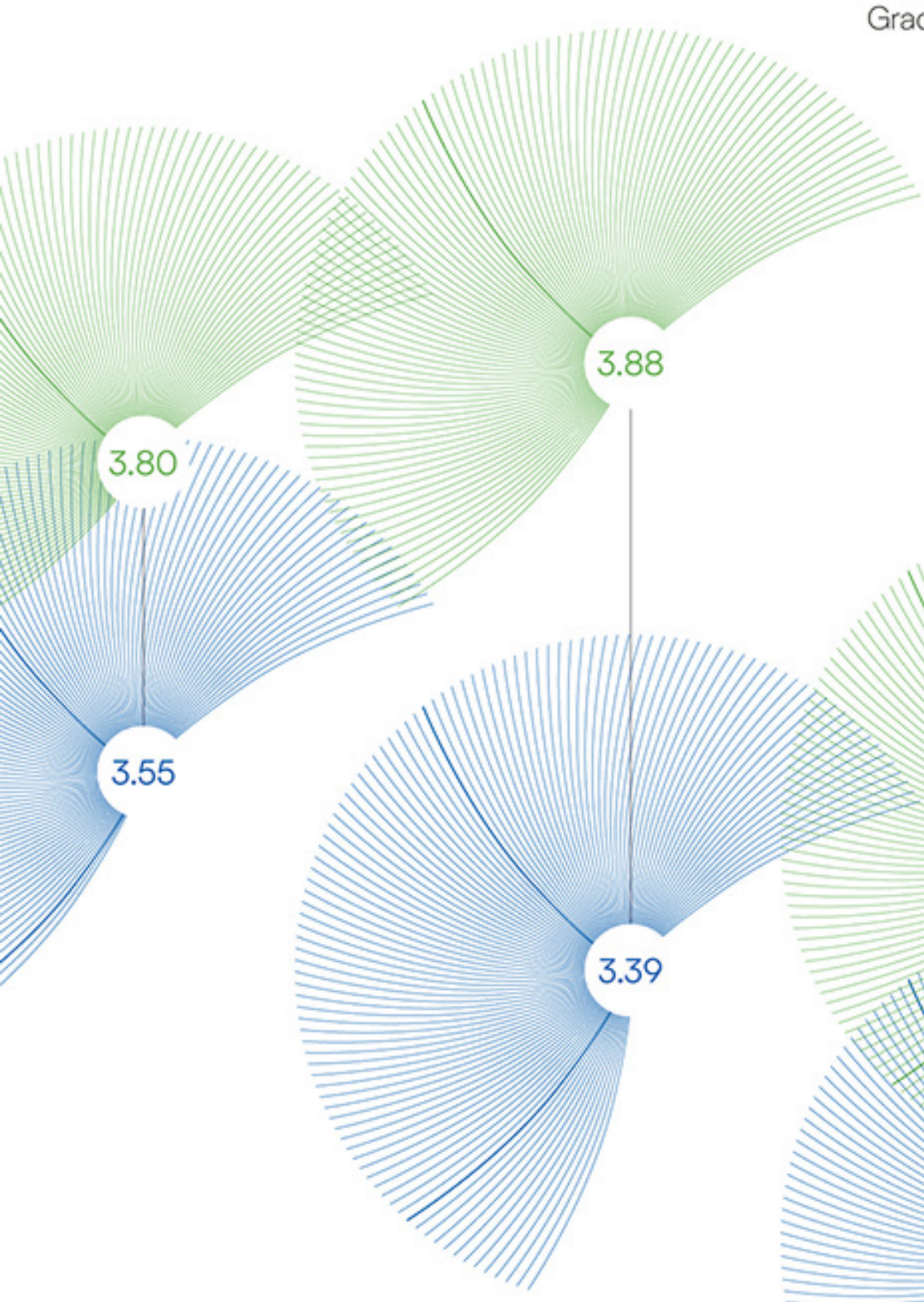
Green = desire to be better understood

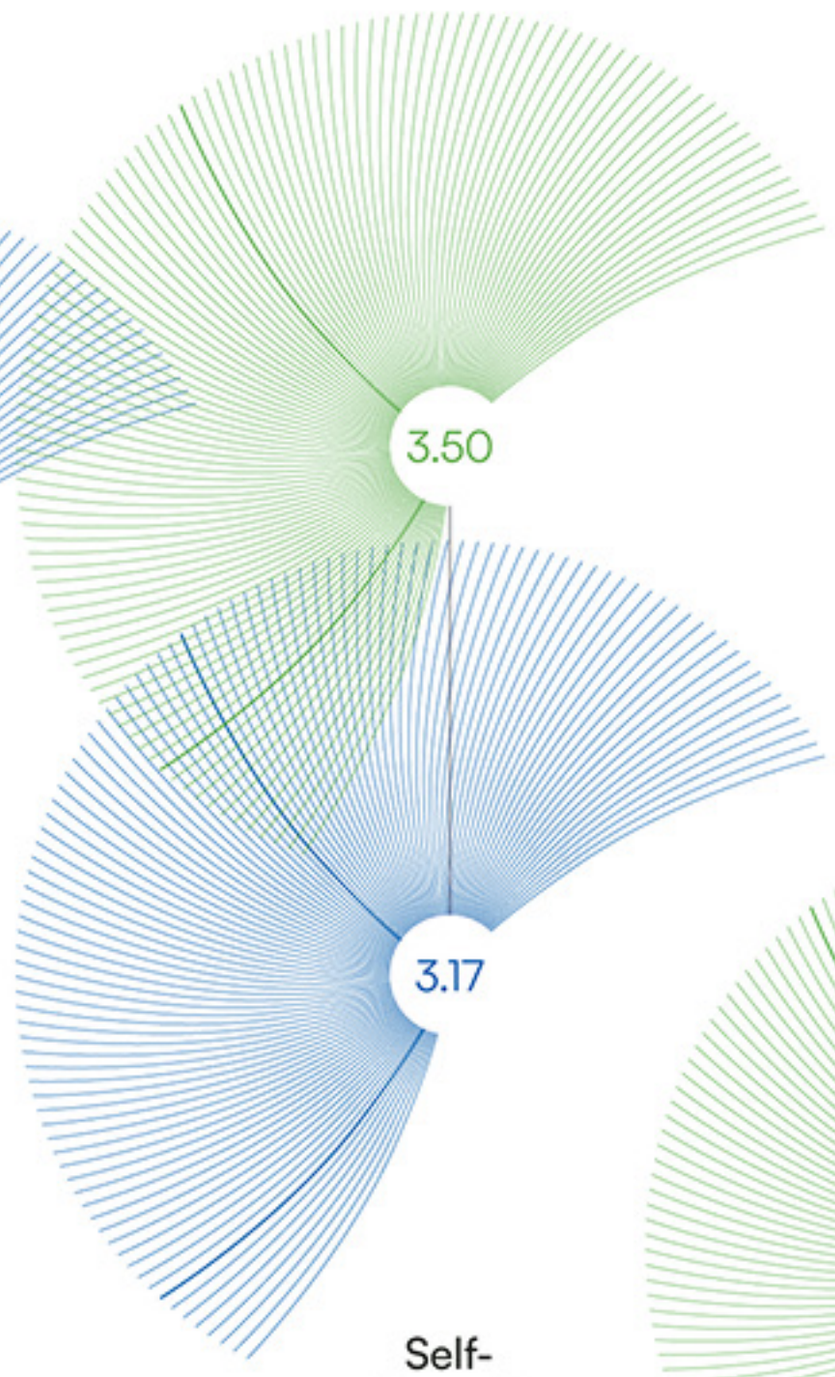


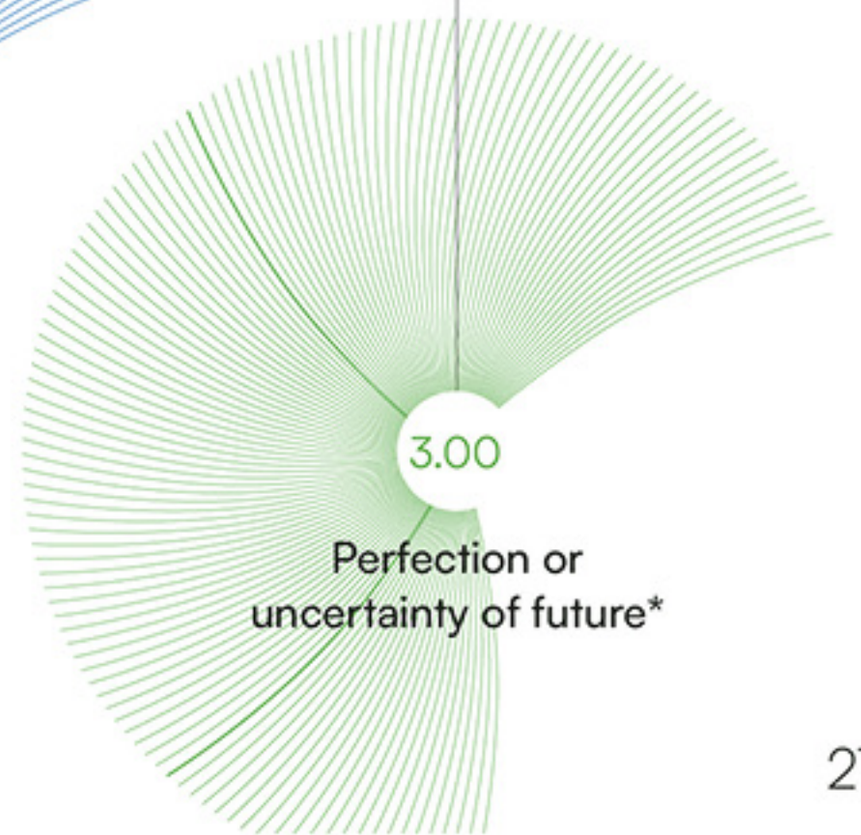
Example

Average likert = 3.12
Standard deviation = 1.02
Gradient circle denotes significance









Financial problems

Health concerns

Self-image*

Perfection or uncertainty of future*

It's Hard to Say

147 people selected an average of 2.84 reasons for why they find overthinking hard to talk about.

Only those who feared being misunderstood or judged showed a significant desire to be better understood. People who said they don't find it hard to talk about overthinking were more likely to feel already understood, compared to other respondents. Other reasons did not show a consistent pattern.

Overthinking can be hard to talk about—especially when we're afraid of being misunderstood or judged (Fig. 6). People who hold these fears, as well as those whose overthinking are triggered by social media or news (Fig. 5), were more likely to say it felt harder to open up, and more likely to wish others understood them better.

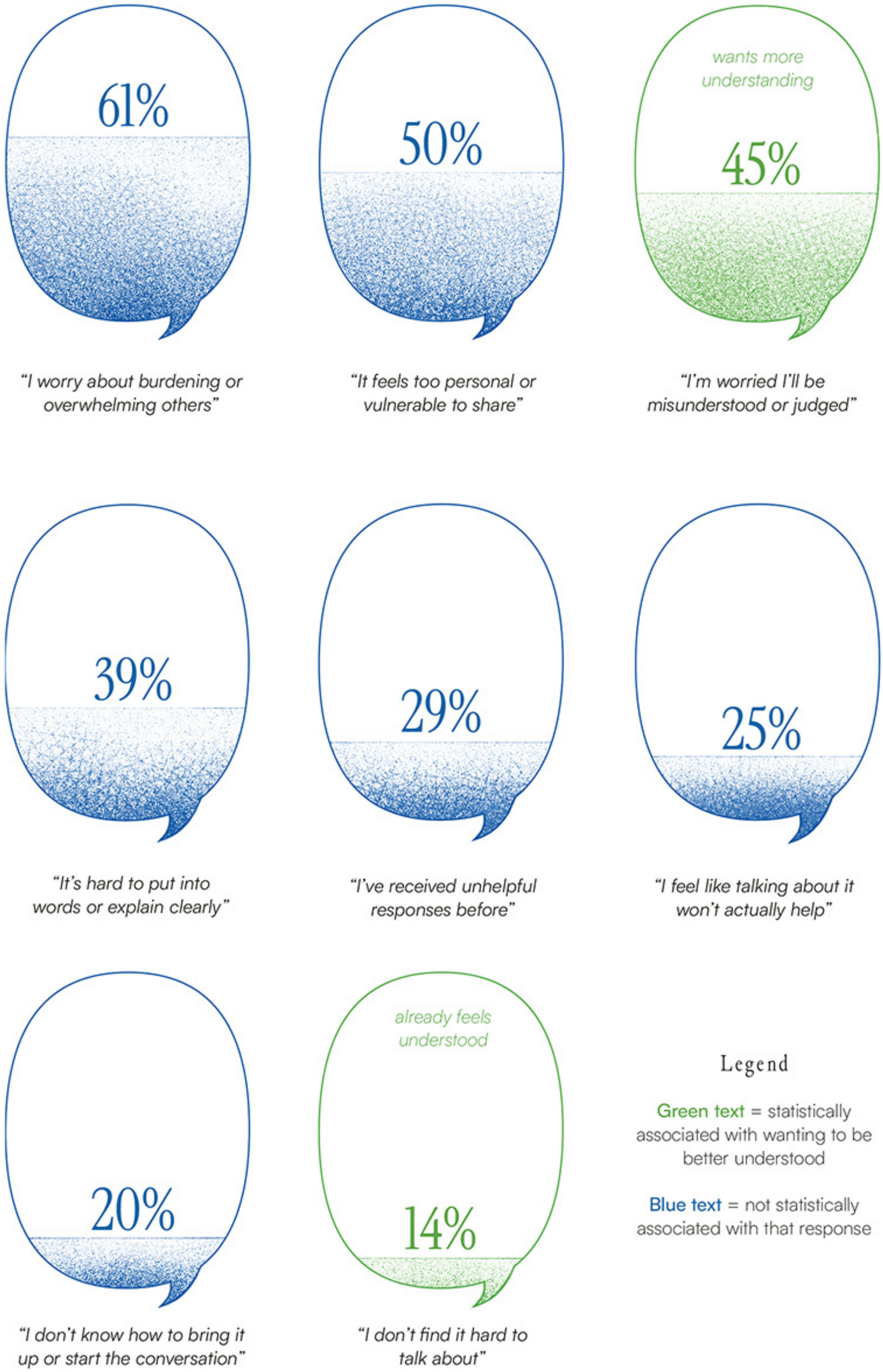
Other responses didn't show a strong statistical link. But that doesn't make them any less valid; it just means that for those particular groups, no predictable trend emerged.

It's a quiet friction: the desire to be understood colliding with the fear of being exposed. We need to share how we think in order to feel seen, but sharing doesn't guarantee understanding. Sometimes it lands, sometimes it doesn't.

How easily we talk about our overthinking often depends on how complex or socially accepted our struggles feel. And while people who find it easier to open up also tend to feel better supported (Fig. 6), the causality isn't always clear. Do they feel supported because it's easy to talk—or is it easy to talk because they already feel supported? This often depends on the context and moment, since these attributes are not only correlated, but dynamically co-created within every conversation.[17]

For those of us without an existing positive network, the vulnerability of sharing feelings can be daunting. And in that uncertainty, it can feel safer to stay silent.

Fig. 6: What Makes Overthinking Hard to Express



Sometimes, the directions they offer don't lead me home.
Others are navigating their own overgrown paths,
unsure of the way
themselves.

Some friends carved a trail from
their world ———— to ———— mine,
cutting down roots, ———— hoping to guide me back.

Their intentions were kind. But I wasn't ready to let
these thoughts go.
I needed more time to
w a n d e r
through the mess –

not cut it down and leave it behind.

Instead of finding my way, I only felt more lost!

"Why bother growing flowers if they're useless?" The flowers — all of them — are part of who I am. The flowers

The flowers
– all of them –
are part of who I am.
They might confuse you,
but they mean something to me.

What I Needed Was Different

Support gaps matter. How our social networks respond to vulnerability can either ease distress or intensify overthinking.

In one study of bereaved adults, those who ruminated were more likely to seek support, but also reported more social friction and less emotional validation.[18] In conditions like depression or social anxiety, where rumination plays a role in onset and maintenance, an unsupportive response can reinforce the cycle and make recovery feel further away.[19]

The mere expectation of a poor response can deepen stigma and create silence before the conversation even begins. This is why attuned support matters: not just to interrupt overthinking in the moment, but to preserve the fragile willingness to reach out at all.

Sometimes care doesn't feel like care. It scrapes when I need softness, or smothers when I need air.

Feel the weight of my thoughts before lifting them.

Absence of Support

For some, support is a foreign concept. One interviewee described scrolling through their phone, searching for someone to confide in, only to close the app and turn instead to motivational speakers and books. Trust is a high threshold; without it, personal struggles remain locked away. Overthinking, for them, is not just a habit but a thread woven through their identity—persistent, familiar, and quietly painful.

Being Understood, Not Helped

Another person recounted moments when friends listened and nodded, their faces open and concerned. Yet, when the conversation ended, the weight remained. "Being understood," they reflected, "doesn't make the problem go away." For them, support only feels real when it comes from someone who shows up with genuine care; someone whose presence, not just their words, signals safety.

Presence as Care

One found their greatest comfort in someone who simply listened without giving advice. They just craved the validation that their feelings were allowed to exist.

All of this underlines how complex support really is. What helps one person could miss the mark for another.

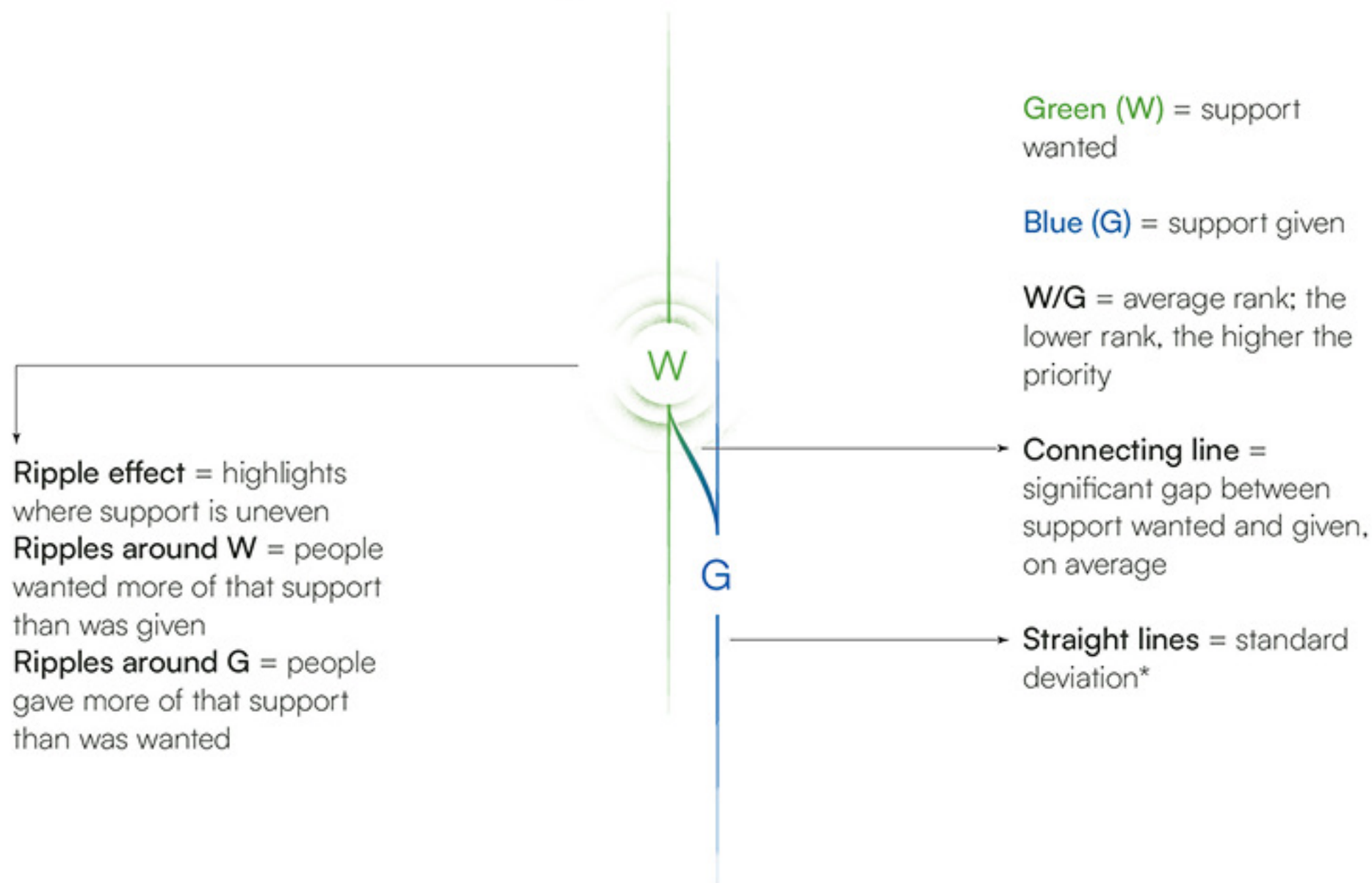
We don't just differ in what we need; we also differ in the way we support, and how we perceive it when it's offered.

What We Give, What We Need

Among 130 people who both overthink and support others who do, a subtle gap emerged. Emotional and thought-based support were given and received in similar amounts, but people tended to give more space than they wanted themselves.

The biggest mismatch was in grounding support, like calming routines or shared activities. On a 14 scale, people wanted it about half a point (~17%) more than they gave it. Yet grounding ranked last overall, whether in giving or receiving. So when we *do* want grounding support, we're unlikely to get it.

Legend



Support Examples

Emotional support: validation, patience, or kind words
Thought support: reframing, perspective, mental clarity, or helping think through next steps
Respect space: asking for what is needed or simply being present without pressure
Grounding activity: exercise, breathing, or a change of scene

Fig 7: Support Gaps by Type of Support

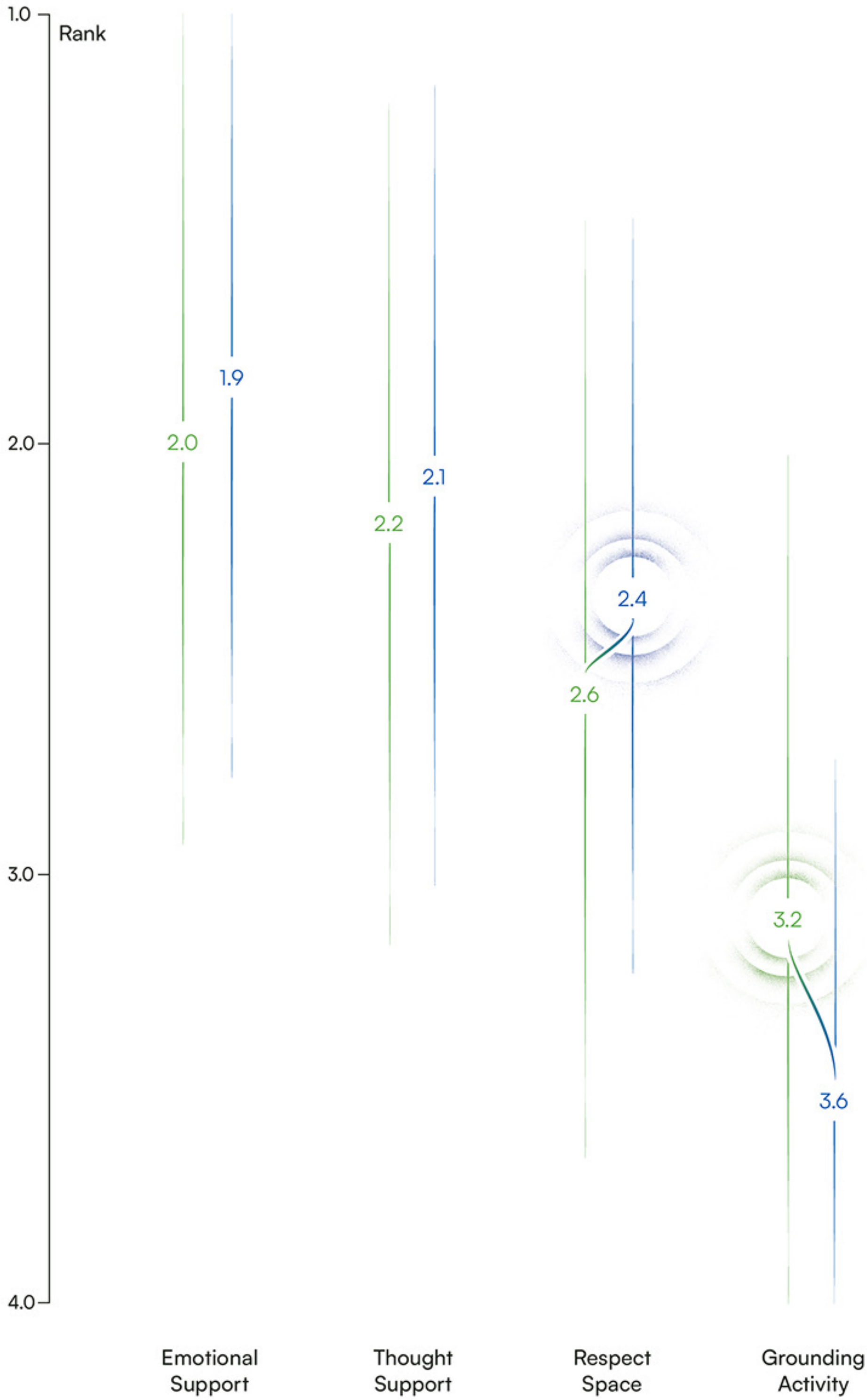
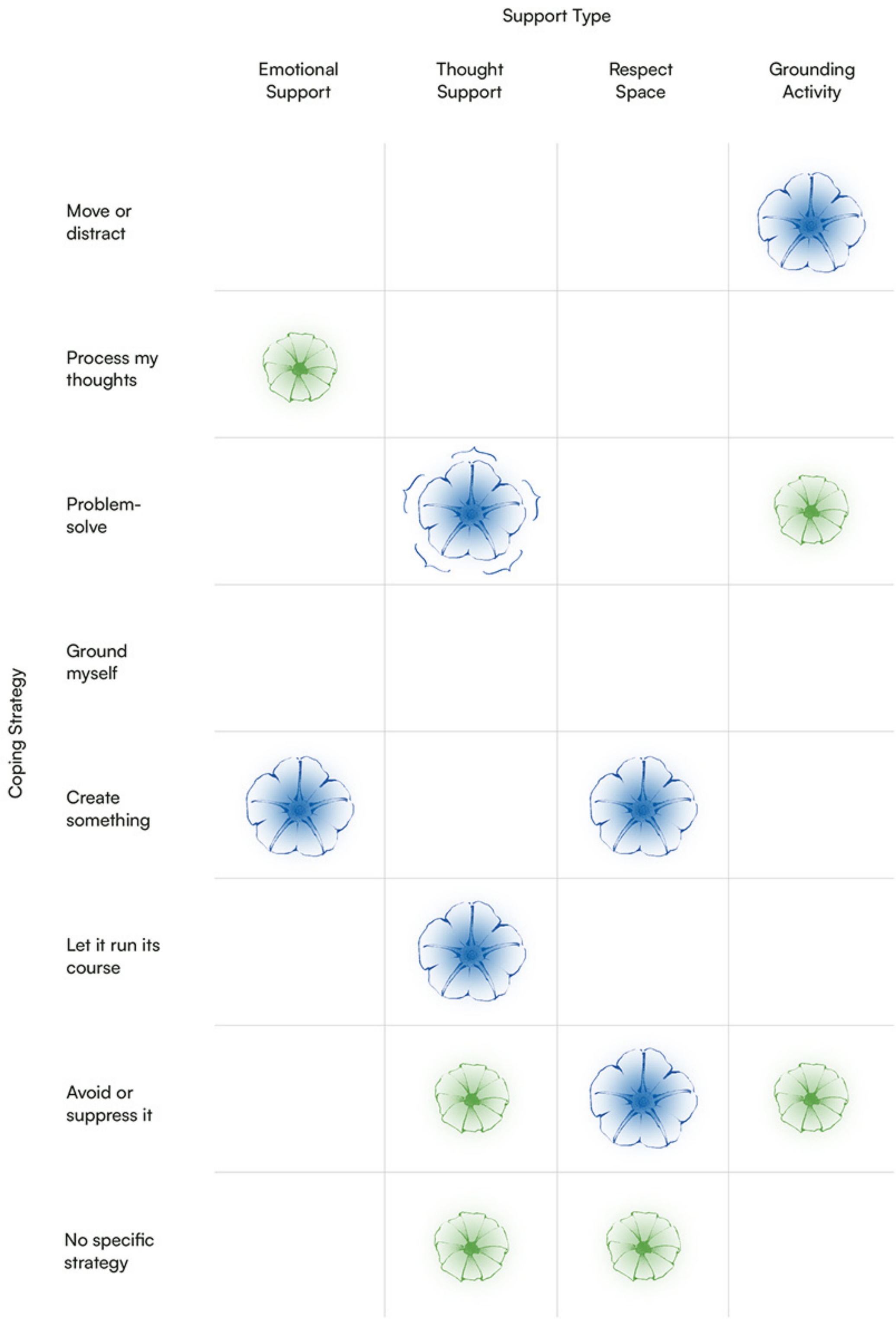


Fig 8: Support Given and Wanted, Grouped by Coping Strategy



Coping to Connection

65* people shared how they cope with overthinking, revealing patterns between self-coping styles and the support they give or want.

People who cope by problem-solving were also more likely to offer similar thought-based support to others. But that didn't necessarily mean they wanted that kind of support themselves, nor did other coping styles show the same pattern.

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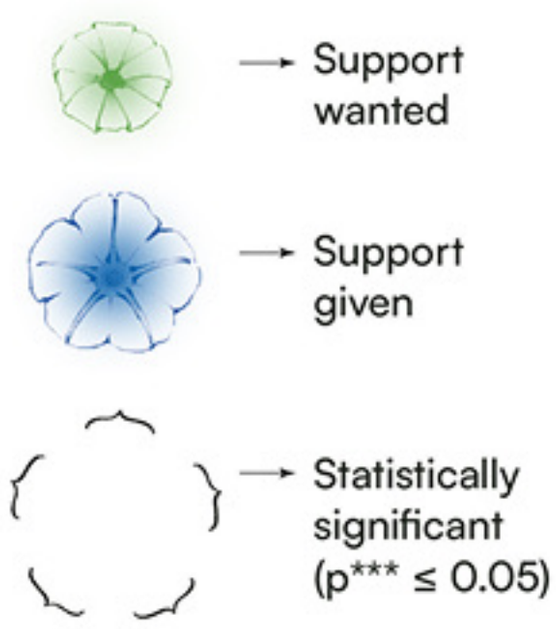
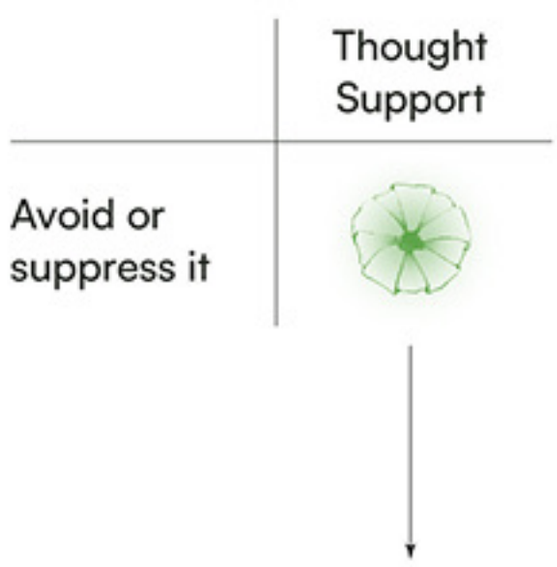


Flowers with no circles are suggestive patterns with 0.05 > p** ≤ 0.30.

How to read this graph



Those who suppress their feelings seem more likely to want thought-based support, though the pattern is weak.

Coping Examples***

Move or distract: walking, scrolling, watching something
Process my thoughts: journaling, self-talk, voice notes
Problem-solve: planning, researching, reframing, analyzing
Ground myself: breathing, body scans, focusing on senses
Create something: drawing, music, crafts
Let it run its course: sit with the feeling, wait it out
Avoid or suppress it: numbing out, ignoring it
No specific strategy: having no go-to solo strategy

What Should We Say?

Unsolicited advice, even when well-intentioned, can make overthinking worse. This might explain why girls, despite reporting more satisfying friendships than boys, also tend to report higher levels of anxiety and depression.[20] Emotional closeness through mutual disclosure deepens connection, but can also intensify fixations on negative thoughts.

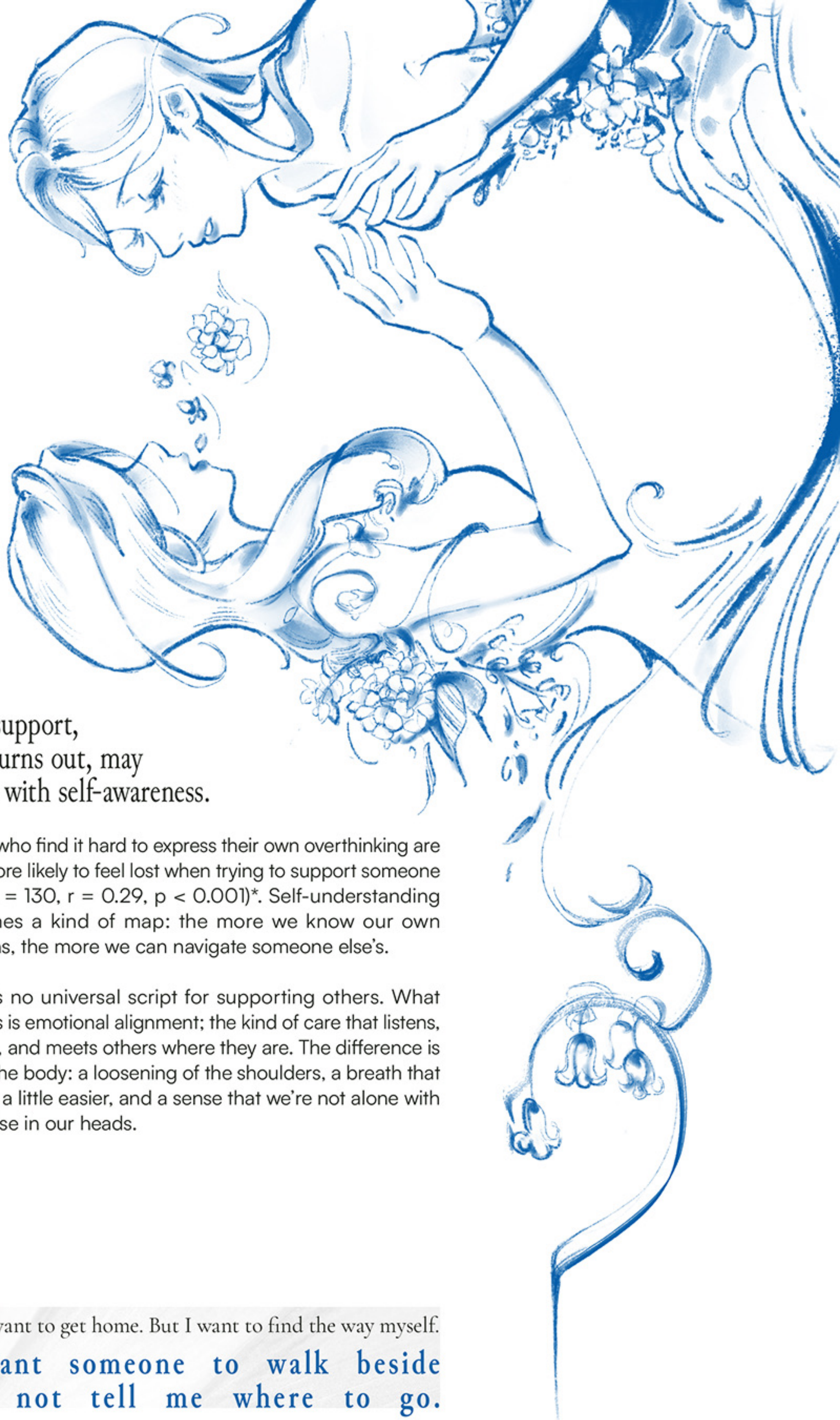
So what does good support actually look like? It's not just about being there. It's about the gestures that say, "I see you."

Research and lived stories both show that the support that helps is the kind that validates, comforts, and helps us make sense of what we're feeling—not just the kind that offers a fix.[21] Most people do want solutions, but only when those solutions feel tuned to what they need deep down.

What we need or give to others sometimes mirrors what works for us when we're alone. The way we self-soothe can shape the kind of support that feels right: for example, people who problem-solve also showed a slight tendency to help others reframe overthinking in the same way (Fig. 8). Yet even when people know what to do, many overthinkers struggle to act upon it.[22] In those moments, what matters most isn't advice; it's steady presence that doesn't judge nor demand.

But support isn't always obvious. Grounding activities, for example, were the least desired and least given form of support (Fig. 7). And yet, there was a significant gap between when it's wanted compared to whether it's received. When people do need grounded support, they're unlikely to get it, highlighting how easily good intentions may miss the mark.

The data shows this misalignment elsewhere too. People who struggle to understand what someone is going through are far more likely to say they don't know how to respond ($n = 134$, $r = 0.40$, $p < 0.001$)*; when we can't read the situation, it's harder to know what to do.



And support, as it turns out, may begin with self-awareness.

Those who find it hard to express their own overthinking are also more likely to feel lost when trying to support someone else ($n = 130$, $r = 0.29$, $p < 0.001$)*. Self-understanding becomes a kind of map: the more we know our own patterns, the more we can navigate someone else's.

There's no universal script for supporting others. What matters is emotional alignment; the kind of care that listens, adapts, and meets others where they are. The difference is felt in the body: a loosening of the shoulders, a breath that comes a little easier, and a sense that we're not alone with the noise in our heads.

I still want to get home. But I want to find the way myself.

I want someone to walk beside me, not tell me where to go.

People mean well, but offering comfort isn't the same as feeling comforted.

Do you really understand me?

Show, Don't Tell

A friend sits across from us, searching for the right words, but the air is thick with what's left unsaid. Their thoughts are entangled, hard to translate. We sense the distance, and the wish for someone to just *get it*.

This isn't rare. Out of 147 people, most wished others could better understand what's happening in their heads—an average of 3.73 out of 5 on a scale of longing for understanding. In other words, many people feel unseen in their internal experience.

When asked if seeing how someone feels might help bridge understanding, 134 people who were support figures for their social circles answered with nearly the same intensity (3.72 out of 5).

There's a measurable link here. People who want to be understood are more likely to see value in emotional visualization ($n = 130$, $r = 0.28$, $p = 0.001$)*. It's not a perfect correlation, but it's strong enough to suggest that those who crave understanding may also be more open to visual tools—not just to connect with others, but to be seen themselves.

But this belief doesn't hold as strongly for those who say they struggle to read how someone's feeling ($n = 134$, $r = 0.15$, $p = 0.08$)* or feel unsure how to respond when someone is overthinking ($n = 134$, $r = 0.17$, $p = 0.052$)*.

Those who struggle to understand others don't show the same appetite for visual tools. The interest is there, but faint, suggesting that the people who most need new ways to connect may not always reach for them.

This is a gap:

- Those who feel misunderstood are open to new ways of being seen.
- Those who struggle to understand may not seek out nor trust the tools that could help.

It might seem strange to try and see something as internal as overthinking. Emotions and logic often feel like opposites—so how could a visual possibly help?

Yet, emotional data visualization already shapes how we understand the world.[23] It's used in design, journalism, and public communication to make complex issues more comprehensible and human. A map with a mood-matched colour palette feels right; a clashing one feels off.[24] In these cases, visualizing emotion doesn't replace logic. It works with it, telling a fuller story.

Visualizing emotion can shift how we think, feel, and act.[25] It can move us in ways that language alone cannot.

So why not bring this approach to overthinking? If the experience is hard to explain, yet deeply personal, we should aim to explore effective ways, be it visual or sensory, to express it in cases where words are not enough. Not just to be understood, but to better understand ourselves. To pause the loop.

After all, people only see what we choose to show. And we can only make sense of what we're able to notice.

Some parts are visible, like the flowers on the surface.

But something buried in the soil feeds the cycle of growth.

Underneath, a wheel spins, and I run, looping the same thoughts again.

I run, not to get somewhere, but because I don't know how to stop.

This motion stirs the soil.

Some thoughts bloom – overthinking that guides me forward.

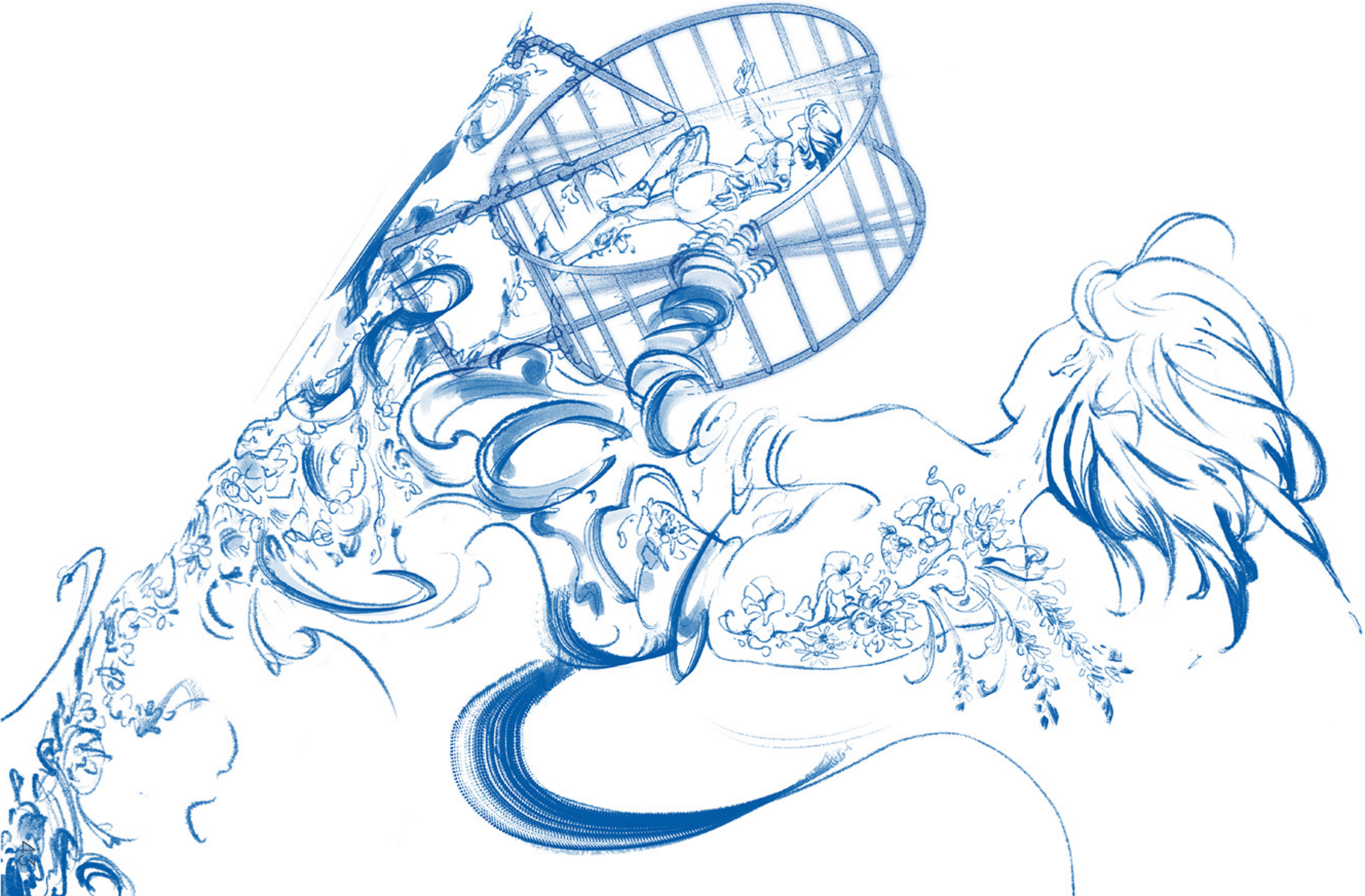
Some twist into scribbles – loops that keep me lost.

Some wilt, and in their falling, I see clearly.

Some stay small, just buds – grounded and waiting.

Even when it feels useless, this motion moves something.

Even the thoughts that go nowhere still grow into something **worth feeling.**



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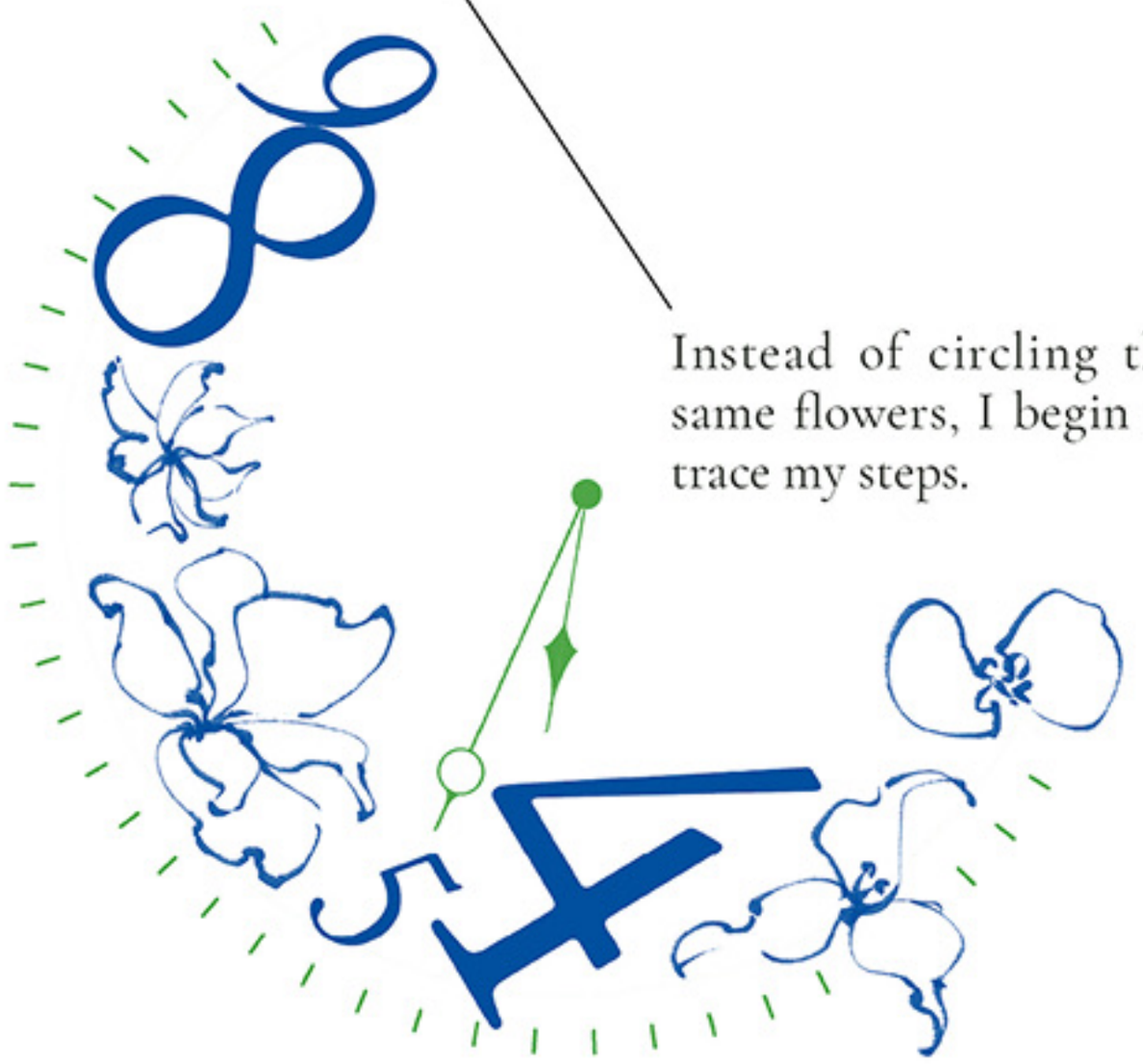
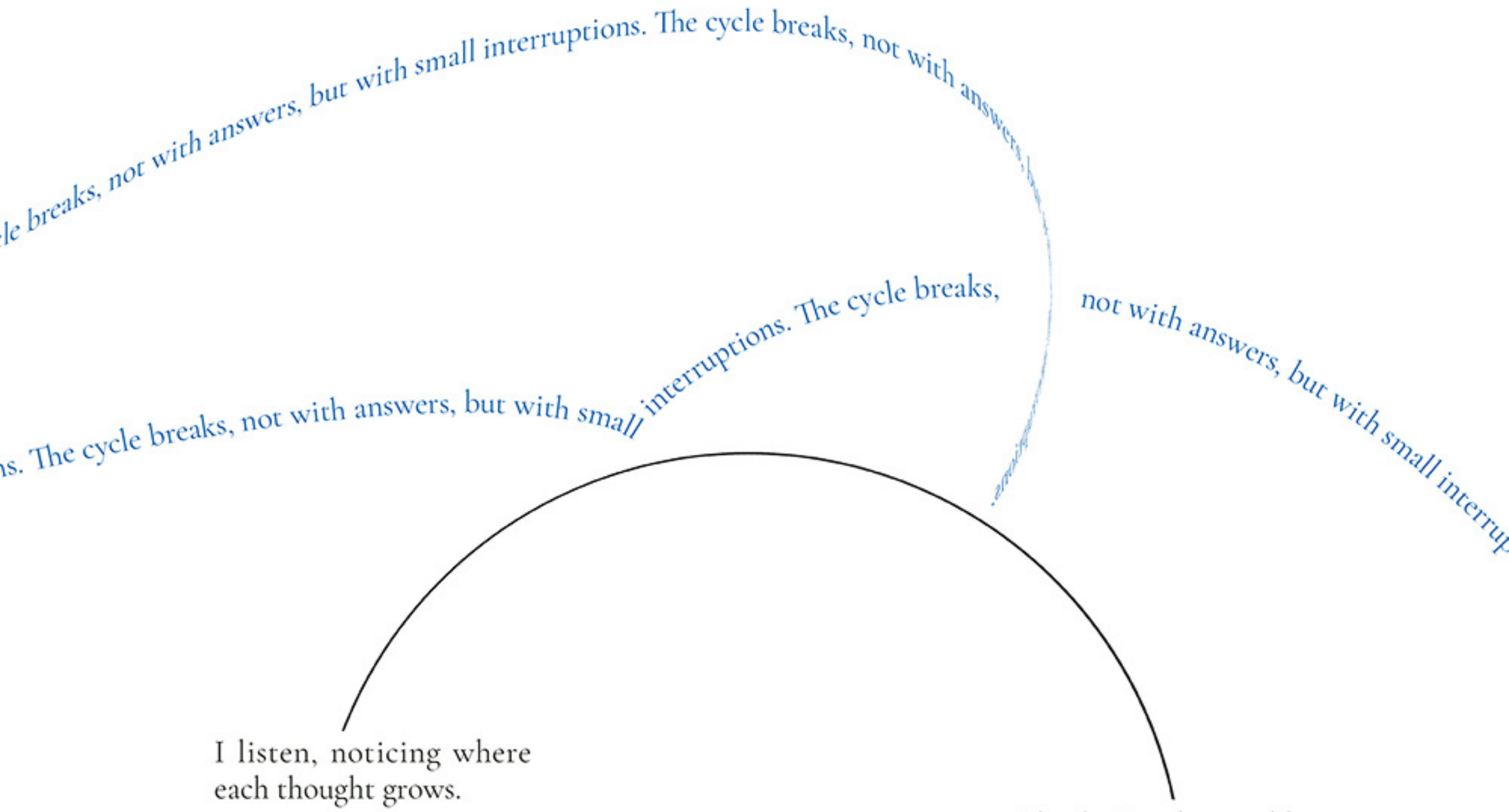
Slowing down helps me find my way back home.



Instead of circling the same flowers, I begin to trace my steps.

The cycle breaks, not with answers, but with small interruptions. The cycle breaks, not with answers, but with small interruptions. The cycle breaks, not with answers, but with small interruptions.


I listen, noticing where
each thought grows.
Slowly, I understand how
everything connects.
When I think about what
steps to take next,
thoughts begin to clear on
their own.

Do You Help Yourself?

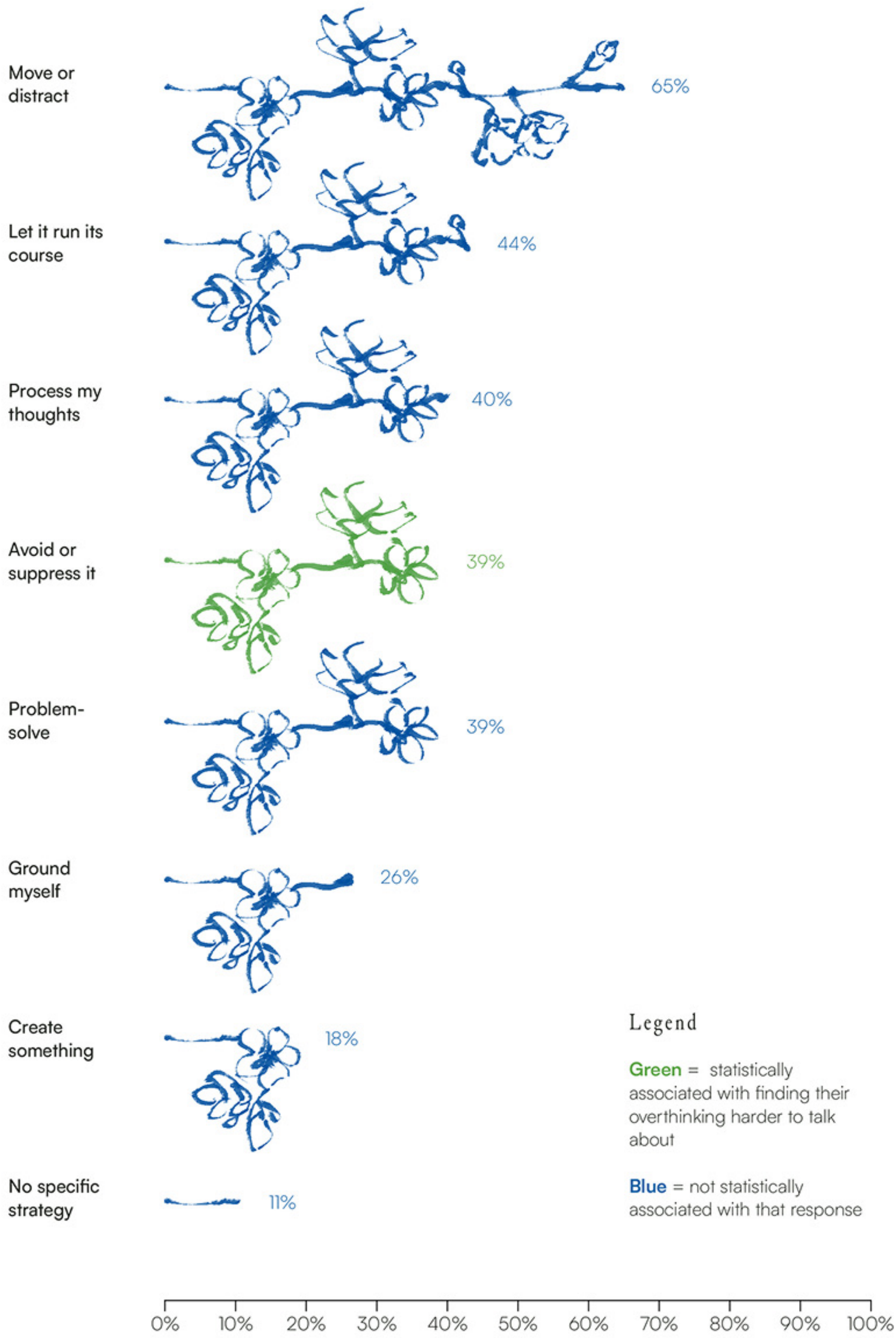
57* people selected an average of 2.81 self-coping strategies each. The length of each branch shows how frequently a strategy was chosen.

Those who avoided or suppressed their overthinking were more likely to find it hard to talk about. Other strategies showed no clear link to how hard it felt to talk about overthinking with others.

Coping Examples

Move or distract: walking, scrolling, watching something
Process my thoughts: journaling, self-talk, voice notes
Problem-solve: planning, researching, reframing, analyzing
Ground myself: breathing, body scans, focusing on senses
Create something: drawing, music, crafts
Let it run its course: sit with the feeling, wait it out
Avoid or suppress it: numbing out, ignoring it
No specific strategy: having no go-to solo strategy

Fig 9: Self-Coping Strategies for Overthinking



Beyond Friends and Family

A good talk with a loved one can help with overthinking, but we can't expect them to fix our discomfort for us. In the end, most of the work happens internally.

We often look to others for answers. Seeing how someone else copes can be reassuring because it normalizes our own experience.[26] Sometimes we try what worked for them, hoping it might help us too. But no one else can shift our thoughts or regulate emotions for us. That work is ours.

Research suggests that self-compassion plays a bigger role than we might think. High self-criticism, even when meant to drive accountability, often backfires and worsens outcomes.[27]

And when we're caught in overthinking, our brains aren't in the best environment to problem-solve. Trying to think everything through from a distressed state rarely works.[28]

Many people seem to know this intuitively. Moving or distracting themselves was the most common coping strategy, and 65% of respondents said they do this regularly (Fig. 9). Research backs this up: movement, laughter, reading, or even a good meal can help loosen the body and steady breathing.[29] It's easier to face the loop once the body feels safe to do so.

For others, writing or structured problem-solving feels more natural.[30] About 40% of respondents process their thoughts this way, and 39% problem-solve directly (Fig. 9). A 30-minute "worry window," for instance, can create space to name what's bothering us, notice what's in our control, and map out a few next steps.[31] Some people turn "what if" spirals into "what then" plans, which makes the next move more concrete. Reappraisal—changing how we see a situation—can support well-being, while suppression tends to increase stress over time.[32]

Sometimes the answer to our struggles already lives in our minds, even if it takes time to surface.[33] Letting the thought run its course, or setting it aside until later, can help; 44% of respondents said waiting it out works for them (Fig. 9).

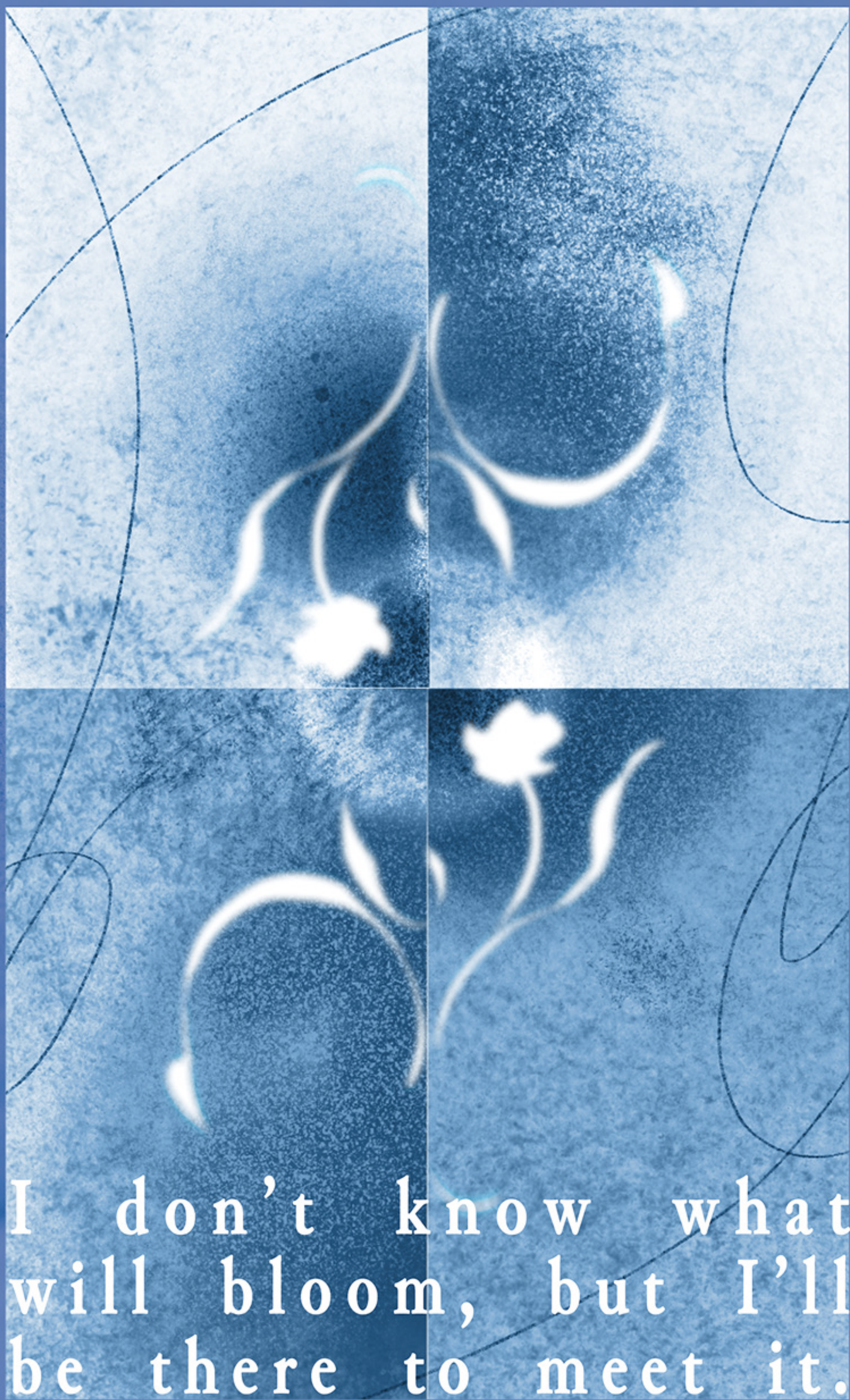
But adopting others' coping strategies isn't always the best path. Avoidance and suppression, while discouraged by experts, were still the fourth most common strategy (39%; Fig. 9).[34] While avoiding can help in the short-term, it can keep us stuck for longer.

Therapy, of course, can help, especially if we find someone we trust. Unlike friends or family, therapists are trained to offer support in a tailored, personal way. Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) is the most common approach, but rumination-focused CBT (RFCBT) goes further by training us to think in more grounded, concrete ways. RFCBT has been shown to reduce depression, anxiety, and rumination, often outperforming standard treatment across multi-week protocols.[35] Still, therapy can only guide. The real work—shifting our state, grounding the body, making sense of thoughts—always happens within us.

And it's not just about changing our thoughts. Long-term change also depends on processing the emotional layer.[36] Sometimes feelings don't have names. Sometimes the work is simply to notice the feeling and sit with it.

Even the heaviest thoughts can pass.
They leave traces, but I know they won't hold forever.
Everything shifts, eventually.

My garden of overthinking wilts in its own time. When it does, I'll find home and rest. Another season will come, and another garden may grow.


I don't know what
will bloom, but I'll
be there to meet it.

Data Citations

Pages 6-7

* Survey: 147 self-identified overthinkers, 5 non-overthinkers. Age: 95% aged 18-24, 5% aged 35-65+. Gender: 61% female, 36% male, 2% non-binary. This is a snapshot of lived experience, not a clinical study.

** Four female and two male interview participants, reflecting the gender skew among self-identified overthinkers.

Pages 8-9

* These themes were mentioned in open responses, not included in the original survey list. Their actual frequency may be underrepresented.

Pages 26-27

* These themes were mentioned in open responses, not included in the original survey list. Their actual frequency may be underrepresented, thus the means and standard deviations may be skewed.

Pages 34-35

* Standard deviation lines are clipped at scale boundaries (ranks 1 and 4). On ranked data, standard deviation is a rough guide to variability, not a precise measure.

Pages 36-37

* Since fewer than 100 people answered this question, any patterns—statistical or otherwise—should be interpreted with caution.

** In stats terms: n is the number of respondents, r measures the strength of the relationship (closer to 1 = stronger), and p indicates how likely the result is due to chance. A p-value under 0.05 is generally considered reliable.

*** For support examples, see pp. 33-34.

Pages 38-39

* In stats terms: n is the number of respondents, r measures the strength of the relationship (closer to 1 = stronger), and p indicates how likely the result is due to chance. A p-value under 0.05 is generally considered reliable.

Pages 40-41

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Pages 46-47

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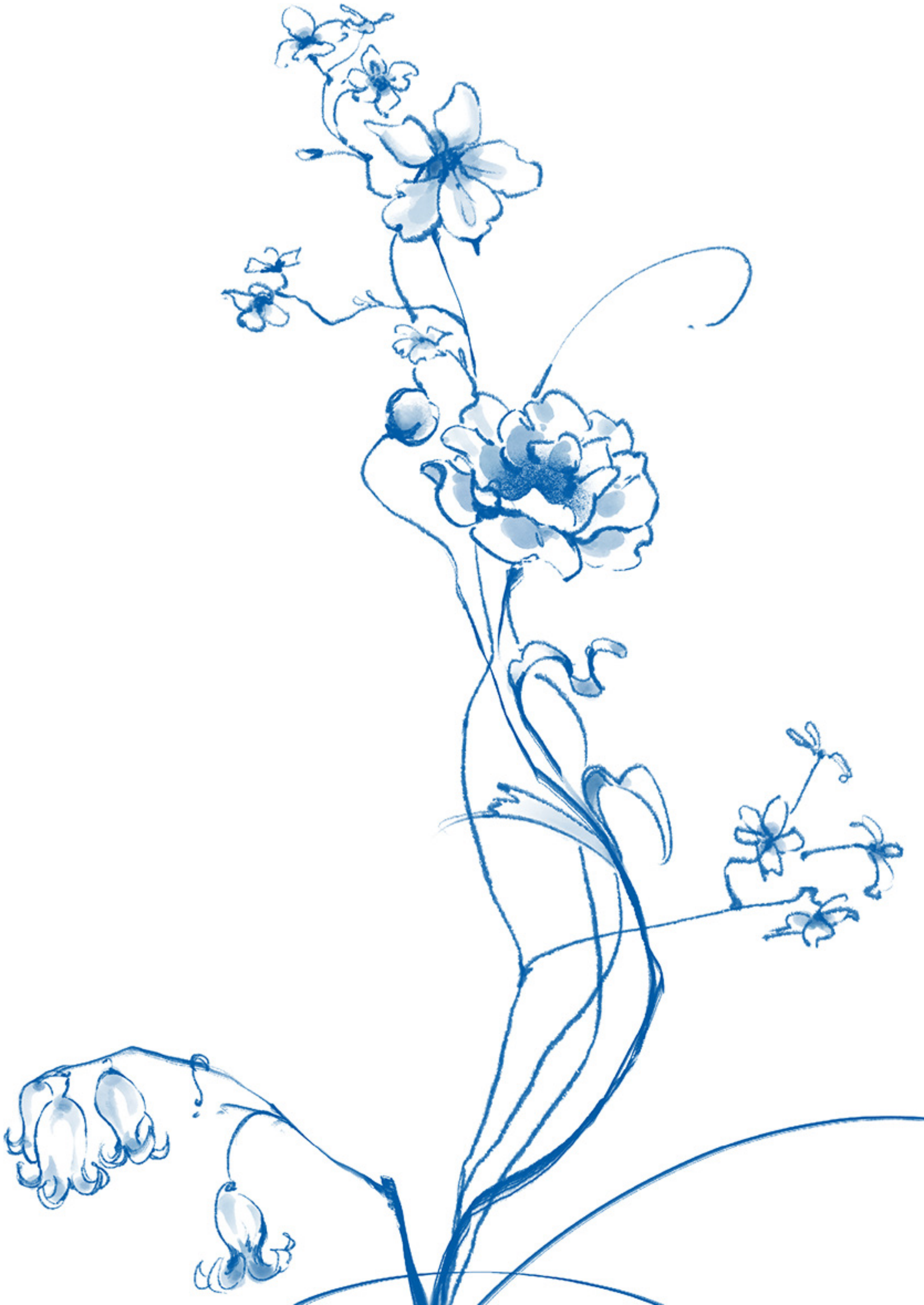
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