FREE GUIDE · OVERTHINKING

Overthinking and intrusive thoughts: why your brain plays the disaster film

Why your brain replays, rehearses and imagines the worst, why pushing thoughts away backfires, and what works better.

It's 2am. Your body is exhausted, but your brain has decided this is the perfect moment to replay the conversation you had at lunch, rehearse the meeting you've got on Thursday, and show you a short film of everything that could go wrong with your health. You tell it to stop. It turns the volume up.

If that sounds familiar, there's nothing wrong with you. Your brain is doing what brains do: trying to solve problems, using pictures, on a limited budget. This guide explains why overthinking and intrusive thoughts happen, why pushing them away backfires, and what works better.

Try this first: the pink elephant

Read each step, then actually do it before you read the next.

1. Picture a pink elephant.
2. Now make it green.
3. Put a black hat on it.
4. Make it walk. Then make it do something silly.
5. Now, for ten seconds, do *not* think about the green elephant in the hat.

How did that go? In about a minute you've learned four things about your brain. It makes pictures without asking. You can change those pictures. It fills in the details for you (what kind of hat?). And trying not to think about something keeps it hanging around. Every one of those matters when the pictures aren't funny.

Your brain shows you videos

Your brain doesn't only think in words. It shows you films. Worried about a presentation? It plays you a clip of your mind going blank and someone smirking. Worried about your health? A video of the doctor's face as she delivers bad news.

And here's the important bit: your brain doesn't make a very clear distinction between a video it's showing you and something that is really happening. Your heart speeds up, your stomach knots, your palms sweat, while you sit safely on your sofa. As far as a large part of your brain is concerned, it's real.

Why overthinking happens

Overthinking is a problem-solving team working in the background. When something feels unresolved, your

brain sends the team out to test scenarios, look for answers and prepare for every possibility. It's trying to help: an explanation lets it plan, and a plan calms it down. Your brain would rather have a bad plan than no plan at all.

The trouble is that some problems can't be solved by thinking, either because they haven't happened yet or because there's no answer to find. The team keeps working anyway, and it costs a fortune in tokens. That's why worrying is so exhausting even when you've done nothing all day.

And if the team can't find an answer, it gets creative. "What about this theory: that headache is a brain tumour." No? "Fine. What about your heart? Or the way your friend replied with one word?" When your nervous system is running low, it puts on a pair of hypervigilant goggles and goes looking for an explanation, and it will always find one. That's how human brains operate. And the worst position for a human brain to be in is helplessness: a problem it can't fix and can't stop thinking about.

Intrusive thoughts: the ones that shock you

Sometimes the pictures are disturbing: harming someone you love, shouting something awful in a quiet room, a car crash on the way to school. Almost everyone gets thoughts like these from time to time. They are not wishes, intentions or warnings. They are your brain's threat system throwing up the worst possible picture, often *because* it's the opposite of what you value.

What turns an intrusive thought into a problem isn't the thought. It's the reaction: alarm, then trying to push it away, check it, neutralise it or seek reassurance. That reaction tells your brain the thought was important, so it sends it back more often. If thoughts like these are frequent and you find yourself doing things to cancel them out, it may be OCD, and it is very treatable. My guide to OCD checking and ERP explains how that loop works.

Why "just stop thinking about it" doesn't work

In 1987, the psychologist Daniel Wegner asked people not to think about a white bear. They thought about it more, and when they were later allowed to think about it, it came back even more often. To check that you're *not* thinking about something, your brain has to keep a little part of itself looking out for it. The search keeps it alive.

So fighting a thought is like holding a beach ball under water. It takes a lot of effort, and the moment you let go, it shoots up higher.

What works better

1. Notice the video, and name it

"Ah. My brain is showing me the presentation disaster film again." Naming it puts a little distance between you and the video. It's a picture your brain is making, not the future.

2. Edit the video instead of deleting it

You can't delete a thought, but you can edit it. Remember the elephant? You changed its colour and put a hat on it. Do the same with the worry video. Play it to the end instead of freezing on the worst frame: you go

blank, you take a sip of water, you look at your notes, you carry on, and later you're at home with a cup of tea. Or change it in a silly way: everyone in the meeting is wearing a hat. You're not pretending it's fine. You're showing your brain that the video is editable, and that the worst frame isn't the last one.

3. Give the team a meeting time

Set aside 15–20 minutes a day as your worry meeting. Write the worries down, and for each one ask: is there anything I can do about this? If yes, plan the next small step. If not, park it. When the worry pops up at other times, tell your brain: "Not now. We've got a meeting about you at six."

4. Close the loops you can close

Often one small action, like sending the email, booking the appointment or making the phone call, shuts down a surprising amount of background processing.

5. Let the loops you can't close stay open

For problems that can't be solved yet: "We can't solve this today. We'll know more on Thursday. You can stand the team down until then." It won't always listen. Sometimes it will.

6. When in doubt, do nothing (for now)

When your brain is clamouring for you to act right now, by sending the text, googling the symptom for the fifteenth time or confronting the friend, it often hasn't finished processing. Let the script finish running. Sleep on it. Tomorrow's answer is usually better than the one your brain is shouting at you now.

7. Switch your brain on

When you're caught in a spiral, do something your body can't do on autopilot. Pat your head and rub your tummy, then swap hands. It's silly, it often makes people laugh, and it pulls your attention into the present for long enough to break the loop.

Attention is a bit like a telescope: whatever you point it at gets bigger. You can't delete the worry, but you can point the telescope somewhere else for a while, and the volume comes down.

8. Check your tokens

Overthinking gets louder when you're tired, hungry, stressed or in pain, because a depleted brain has less capacity to steer. If the 2am spiral is a regular visitor, look at sleep, caffeine, alcohol and how much you're carrying during the day.

A conversation with your brain

"Brain, you're showing me the disaster film again."
"Because it might happen!"
"It might. What happens after this bit?"
"…I don't know. I stopped at the bad part."
"Let's watch the rest. Then we'll decide if there's anything to do tonight."

When to get more help

Get support if overthinking or intrusive thoughts are taking up a lot of your day, stopping you sleeping, or leading you to check, avoid or seek reassurance a lot. If you're having thoughts of harming yourself, please talk to someone now: call NHS 111 and choose the mental health option, or Samaritans on 116 123. In an emergency, call 999.

Worksheets

You'll find these printable worksheets at the end of this PDF:

- **The worry meeting**: a daily log to park worries, plan next steps and notice what you can and can't control
- **Edit the video**: a sheet to rewrite a worry film, from the worst frame to the end
- **Thought or fact?**: a quick check for when your brain is being very convincing

Further help

- NHS Every Mind Matters: tips for worry and anxiety.
- OCD-UK: if intrusive thoughts come with checking or rituals.

Written by Dr Monica Berntsen, HCPC-registered Consultant Psychologist and Neuropsychologist. This guide is for general information and isn't a substitute for individual assessment or treatment.

Want some help with this?

I offer online therapy across the UK. Get in touch at drmonicaberntsen.com/contact and I'll suggest the best next step.

Read this guide online, and find more free guides, at drmonicaberntsen.com/resources.

WORKSHEET 1

The worry meeting

Once a day, 15–20 minutes. Write each worry down, then decide: can I do anything about it? If yes, what is the next small step? If not, park it until tomorrow's meeting.

Date	The worry	Can I act? (Y/N)	Next small step, or "parked"

WORKSHEET 2

Edit the video

Pick a worry film your brain keeps playing. Write the worst frame, then play it all the way to the end, and finally change something about it.

The film my brain shows me

The worst frame (where it usually stops)

What happens next, and next, until it ends

A small change I can make to the video (colour, sound, a silly detail)

How strong is the feeling now? (0–10)

WORKSHEET 3

Thought or fact?

Use this when your brain is being very convincing.

The thought

How true does it feel right now? (0–10)

Evidence that fits it

Evidence that doesn't fit it

What would I say to a friend who had this thought?

Is there anything to do about it today? If not, park it.