

FROM DECIPHERING TEXT MESSAGES TO DECIDING WHETHER YOU SHOULD TAKE THE NEW JOB OR BUY THE HOUSE, HOW MUCH THOUGHT IS TOO MUCH? RE-WIRE YOUR BRAIN TO MAKE BETTER, MORE CONSIDERED, LIFE-CHANGING DECISIONS.

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THINKING ABOUT **OVER-TH**



You've looked at your decision from every possible angle: you've considered all the pros and cons, the ins and outs, the ups and downs – and you've still managed to make an average call. You chastise yourself for not thinking it all through to find the best solution. In hindsight, it seems so obvious. So why, despite all your best intentions, did this happen?

It's quite possible – but don't think about it too hard – that you've been caught over-thinking: that in all the frantic analysing you've gone straight past the best option into a murky quagmire of deep, confusing thought. The result – you choose the wrong action with no confidence or find it impossible to act at all.

"Over-thinking is thinking and analysing a conversation or scenario either for too long or too much," explains Dr Debra Villar, author of *Urban Woman Syndrome*. "When over-thinking, our minds are limited to the same thoughts over and over again instead of acting on them. We become stuck in a situation and our brain is unable to create an action or resolution."

It's as if your brain has tied a knot around the issue at hand, causing you to become incapable of healthy movement or action. Psychologist, author of *Stand Out* and co-founder of Pragmatic Thinking, Alison Hill, believes that over-thinking is the result of your obsession for a 'perfect solution'.

"If it's often the fear of making a 'wrong' choice that leads to over-thinking: what if I move jobs and it doesn't work out; what if I start a business and it fails; what if I start a healthy routine and I don't stick to it," she says. "Underlying this is an unconscious belief that there's a 'right' answer if only we think more about it. In reality, there's often not a 'right' answer – only an option that may be a better fit for now. We always learn

something regardless of whether the fit is right or not."

"The other reason we over-think is because of the sheer number of options that are available to us. We can be paralysed by choice, again waiting for a perfect match, when performing any action and making it work would probably be fine."

Hill says that ultimately any action is better than inaction.

"Being stuck is one of the hardest and unhealthiest places to be sitting in for a long period of time," she says. "The way to overcome this is to make a decision, even if it's to go and gather more data."

THOUGHT TIPPING POINT

When exactly does thinking go from being an essential and productive process that has placed us at the top of the food chain, to being at our own detriment?

"Jumping in without a strategy, without weighing up the options or researching possibilities can be fraught with issues," says Hill.

"But too much weighing, too much researching, too much strategy – essentially too much thinking can also be a problem."

Hill points to four signs you are likely over-thinking:

- » The opinions of others trump your own opinion.
- » You are indecisive and drowning in research – but not getting any clearer on a choice.
- » You are waiting for the perfect answer, choice or direction.
- » You are procrastinating from the actions that will make the difference.

"We know when we've crossed the line of over-thinking when we become too paralysed to take the next step, and catch ourselves distracted by tasks and

INKING



WHEN GUNNING FOR A CAREER CHANGE

THE TRAP:

By its very nature, the workplace involves a lot of thinking and juggling multiple thoughts at once. Getting stuck in an over-thinking rut can severely disrupt your work week, not to mention any chance of dazzling the boss into finally handing you that big promotion.

“Our work and career can define who we are,” says Dr Villar. “We identify ourselves with our work and career. It is how we make money, connections and even socialise. We spend most of our day at work, and over-thinking in this environment can cause problems with our self-esteem, be a major source of stress and can hinder our career advancements.”

Without realising it, your over-thinking directs you into self-sabotaging habits, hijacking your hard-fought success.

“Self-sabotage can occur when we fall into pitfalls of over-thinking at work,” says Hill. You’ll know you’re doing it if you’re guilty of one or more of the classic four ‘P’ techniques of workplace sabotage:

- » **Perfectionism:** not good enough if it’s not perfect.
- » **Procrastination:** putting off the important.
- » **Pessimism:** thinking the worst-case scenario.
- » **People-pleasing:** doing what others want rather than being strategic.

THE SOLUTION

Take a step back and see your role for what it is: it’s too easy to lose perspective when you’re so heavily involved in the day-to-day machinations of workplace politics and outcomes. Ask yourself ‘how could it improve, how could it become more efficient and how could it become more enjoyable?’

“Write down the most important use of your time, to stimulate you into action,” says Hill. “Seek out regular feedback from those you trust.”

If you’re experiencing negative feelings towards an aspect of your job, it’s probably trying to tell you something.

“Negative emotions have a purpose,” says Rob Yeung, psychologist and author of *You Can Change Your Life*. “They provide us with useful information by signalling to our brains that we should be taking some form of appropriate action. No one is – or should be – impervious to feeling bad. An inability to experience unpleasant emotions would rob us of useful feedback – it’s a survival mechanism that tells us when we’re in a genuinely threatening situation. Or we might forge on regardless and never learn when we need to behave differently.”

In short, take note of those negative over-thoughts and move towards change.

conversations that pull us away from making meaningful progress,” says Hill. “The moment that the pit of thinking suffocates us, progress is what suffers. We can feel like we’re going around in circles, and getting dizzy at the thought that it may never stop – which only leads to more over-thinking.”

THE IMPACT

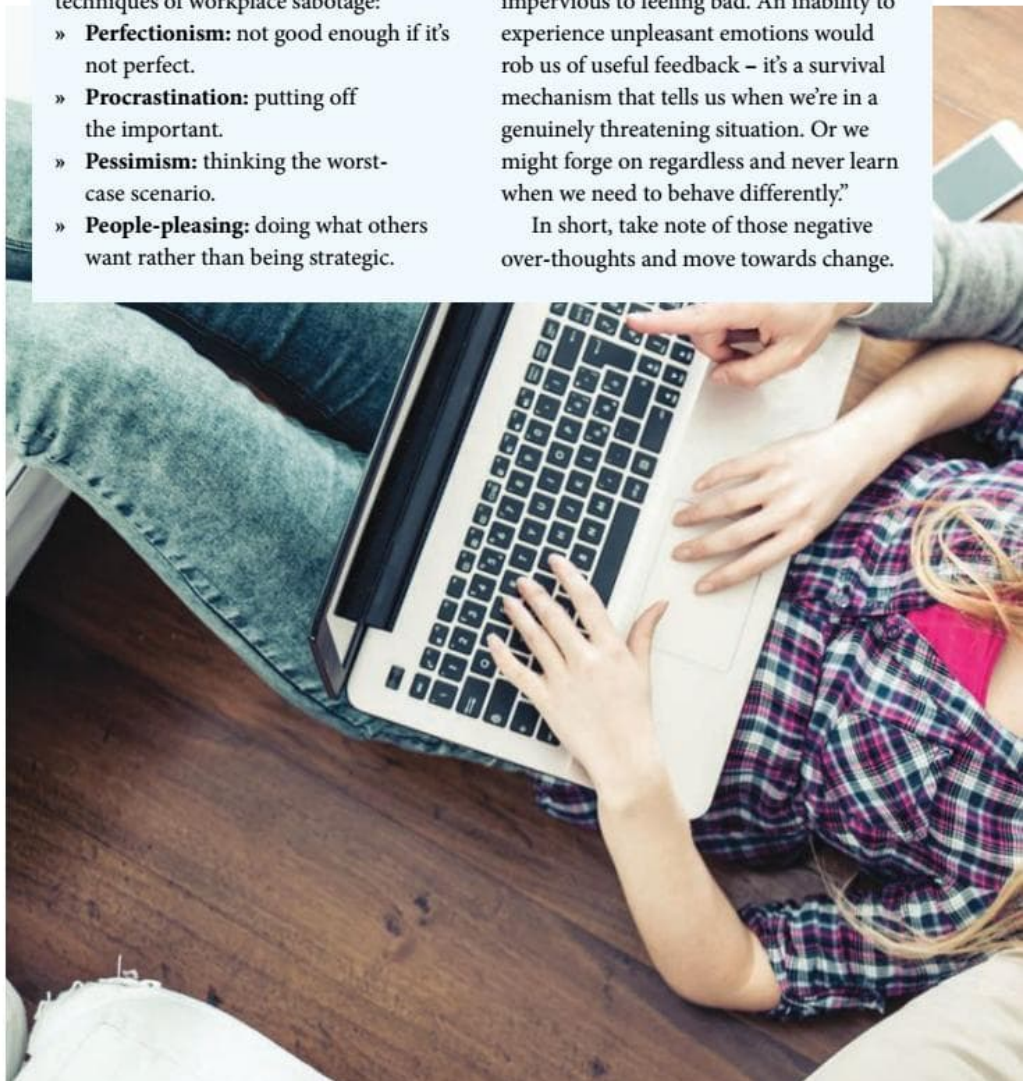
Over-thinking is a far more serious issue than you’d think at first glance, affecting quality of life, and even our mental and physical health.

“This habit can consume energy, increase stress and can make small problems seem much bigger than they actually are,” says Dr Villar. “It can also stop us from living, thriving and creating the life we want out of fear of making the wrong decision. Over-thinking is a form of anxiety and can have serious health consequences. Problems such as compulsive behaviour, panic attacks, anxiety and even depression have been linked to over-thinking.”

Due to the overwhelming nature of over-thinking, it’s natural to look for an escape – however unhealthy.

“If we find ourselves in a spiral of over-thinking we can easily fall into the habit of ‘numbing’ this feeling through food or ‘just one glass of wine,’” says Hill.

“Exercise can also be one of the first things that goes when we’re caught in our head, leaving us feeling sluggish and tired. Doubt, anxiety and fear can all come to the forefront when we’re over-thinking. And these can kick into gear and have us in a downward spiral of ‘it’s all gone to crap’ in a matter of seconds.”



WHEN OVER-ANALYSING TEXT MESSAGES

THE TRAP:

Although some might argue that it's their relationship itself that is the trap, in reality the trap is more likely to be the amount of time spent together. Nothing is more conducive to over-thinking than the intricate connection of two people that is so strong, they remain in your head even when you're apart. A sign of the greatest love, yes, but also fraught with the dangerous possibility of internal dialogues creating outrageous disagreements over almost nothing.

"Other-thinking in relationships can be a sure way to cause them to fail," says Dr Villar. "When we look at our partner's actions and words under a microscope we see things bigger than they actually are. Over-thinking can get in the way of being present with our loved ones, causing us to miss being in the moment. Trust can also be compromised when over-analysing, creating scenarios that may be unfounded."

Hill agrees that your ability to imagine isn't always beneficial.

"Over-thinking in relationships occurs when we read into others behaviours or comments, something that's not there," says Hill. "For example, assuming that when your partner lets out a sigh in your company that they are bored with you and then the slippery slope to 'this is the first sign of us being over' can occur."

THE SOLUTION

In a relationship it's usually best to stick to the facts.

"Always check your assumption with curiosity, realising that there might be another reason for their actions," says Hill. "That sigh

may actually be a sign of sore muscles and a hard workout, and have nothing to do with your relationship status."

Being present rather than running away with your assumptions and preoccupations is an excellent way to maintain a positive, uncomplicated connection in a relationship. This involves the practice of mindfulness.

Martha Langley, mental health expert and author of *The Mindfulness Workbook*, recommends using the technique of mindful listening.

"Mindful listening is a great skill – it can improve relationships and make you more effective in the workplace," she says.

Langley's five key mindful listening requirements are:

- » To be fully present in the conversation while letting go of any other thoughts.
- » To pay full attention to what the other person is saying.
- » Not to think about what you're going to say next while they're speaking.
- » To let go of any negative feelings you may have about what they're saying.
- » To take your time when it's your turn to speak and consider what you're going to say.

"Mindful listening is a powerful tool in all situations where you need to connect with other people. If you have a tendency to judge people hastily, going by their appearance or their speech, then mindful listening will help you set that aside and connect with the real person," says Langley.



WHEN YOU HAVE NIGHTCLUB ANXIETY

THE TRAP:

Socially we are connected like we've never been before – online. On the flipside, we have considerably less face-to-face time, leading us to inevitably fill in the gaps in our mind.

"Over-thinking in social situations limits you in making real connections with people," says Dr Villar. "It can alienate you from friends and family. Humans are meant to be social, and over-analysing a social setting can cause anxiety, and cause you not to be your true self."

If you're a bit out of practice, off your game or something doesn't feel quite right, one of our biggest natural insecurities – 'do I fit in?' – can have us questioning our behaviour or lead us to pretending to be someone we're not. If you're not careful, the fear of not fitting in can spiral into full blown paranoia. Over-think your place in the room and you're in trouble.

THE SOLUTION:

A bit of self-love goes a long way to enjoying the company of others. An extension of this is that you're naturally a more enjoyable person to be with.

"Come back to your values," says Hill. "What are the things that are important to you. Write these down and find ways to engineer time with your family and friends that feeds these values, setting clear boundaries if you need. When we are able to set boundaries, we get to have the freedom to soak up the moments of connection and fun."

Your personality, eccentricities and quirks are what have drawn people to you, and, ironically, are what make you 'fit in'.

"People connect with your authenticity and all of the qualities that make you, you," says Hill. "So fly your freak flag high and your greatest friends will celebrate it." ■