OVER THINK

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A SIMPLE GUIDE TO CALM YOUR THOUGHTS

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THOUGHT BOOK

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To the overthinkers and cycle breakers

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Introduction

Nearly everyone struggles with the repetitive thoughts and irritating mental chatter of overthinking. It's a common frustration affecting 73 percent of people aged 25–35 and 52 percent of those aged 45–55.[1] To put it simply, if you catch yourself replaying social interactions after a party, chances are that most of the other attendees are doing the same thing.

Traditional advice suggests that overthinking is merely thinking "too much," and the solution is for us to somehow reduce our thoughts. But this approach sets us up for failure. Mindfulness techniques and attempts to quiet the mental noise might offer temporary relief, but they only scratch the surface.

To stop the mental chatter and eliminate unwanted and repetitive thoughts for good, we need to dig deeper. We need to identify and address the unproductive thoughts that are leading us into the spiral. Because what's commonly labeled as "overthinking" is actually *unproductive thinking.* And the goal isn't to stop our thoughts, it's to make them more productive.

Productive thinking is when you manage your thoughts to support your mental well-being and align with your values and goals. When thoughts are productive, you naturally opt for quality over quantity, eliminating the tendency to "overthink" or judge your thoughts on the disastrously unproductive over/under scale.

Making this seemingly simple shift will have a significant impact. Your mind doesn't register "don'ts," so if someone tells you, "Don't think of a red balloon," you will likely imagine a red balloon. In all likelihood, you're picturing one right now because I mentioned it. And if I ask you to deliberately *stop* thinking about a red balloon, your thoughts may be overrun with red balloons. The more you think about how you *don't* want to think about red balloons, the more you think about those darn red balloons. This is similar to when you think about how you want to stop thinking so much and end up thinking more. If you are reading this book, I am sure you can relate.

Being productive in your thinking involves understanding this psychological quirk and actively choosing to focus on what you do want, rather than what you don't. When it comes to "overthinking," instead of trying to stop the incessant thoughts, which will intensify the mental chatter and frustration, shifting your focus to what you do want, to think more productively, will reduce the mental noise. So, rather than saying, "I want to stop thinking as much," you'd say, "I am going to make my thoughts work for me."

Ideally, we would have been taught how to think productively in childhood, but traditional education does not put much emphasis in this area. So here you will get a welcome and overdue crash course on how thoughts work and how to make your thoughts productive. These concepts can be tricky so I'll break them down with just enough detail to provide a practical yet effective understanding. In my experience, this is all the average person needs to know so they can create healthier, more productive thoughts.

But before moving forward, it is important to acknowledge how far you've already come. Realizing you are "overthinking" is you becoming aware of your unproductive thoughts. Self-awareness is an incredible skill that, when cultivated, has

the power to change your life. While annoying, those repetitive thoughts are forcing you out of your comfort zone so you can build your awareness and come into your true potential. Cheers to you!

Are Your Thoughts Productive?

You have a wedgie but there's an attractive person in eyesight. Do you pick it? What should you have for dinner? They haven't replied to your text. How long ago did you send it? Should you send a follow-up or would that seem too eager? Are you coming off as clingy again? What now? You just remembered that cringey thing you did in grade school. Oh great, you just remembered that embarrassing thing you did last week.

In this complicated and chaotic world, there's a lot to think about. Since we haven't been taught how to think productively, we often make it more complicated and chaotic than it needs to be.

Unproductive thoughts look like:
- going over the same things repeatedly, even when you try to stop
- continually doubting your abilities and decisions
- replaying past events, examining every detail
- excessively thinking about anxiety-inducing or scary situations
- being hard on yourself and questioning if you're good enough
- expecting worst-case scenarios, even when they're unlikely
- struggling to move past mistakes or missed opportunities

- worrying about what other people might think
- striving for perfection while fearing failure
- feeling overwhelmed with racing thoughts
- feeling ashamed about past events or thoughts you've had

This quiz will help you figure out if your thoughts are unproductive. Check all that apply.

In social situations, do you…

☐ replay interactions in your mind, analyzing every detail

☐ worry a lot about how others perceive you

☐ frequently second-guess the things you say or do

☐ avoid certain social events because you fear making mistakes or feeling out of place

☐ find it hard to start or maintain conversations because you're afraid of saying the wrong thing

☐ feel anxious or self-conscious before, during, or after social gatherings

☐ obsessively plan and rehearse what to say or how to act in social situations

☐ often feel like you don't fit in or belong

☐ dwell on embarrassing moments long after they've occurred

☐ believe others are constantly looking at you or judging you, even when there's no evidence to support it

_____ checked

With self-care and daily routines, do you…

☐ struggle to relax because your mind is always busy with thoughts

☐ frequently feel guilty when you take time for self-care, thinking you should be doing something more "productive"

☐ overanalyze your daily routines and habits, trying to optimize every aspect of your life

☐ feel overwhelmed by your to-do list and have difficulty deciding what to prioritize

☐ worry excessively about minor decisions like what to wear or eat

☐ frequently compare yourself to others and feel like you're not good enough

☐ have difficulty saying no to requests or commitments even when you're already stretched thin

☐ constantly think about work or responsibilities even during leisure time

☐ often procrastinate on important tasks because you're stuck in thought

☐ find it challenging to disconnect from technology and be fully in the moment

_____ checked

When thinking about the future, do you…

☐ spend a lot of time worrying about what will or might happen

☐ have trouble making decisions because you're afraid of making the wrong choice

- ☐ obsessively plan and prepare, often expecting worst-case scenarios
- ☐ frequently feel anxious or stressed about the uncertainty of the future
- ☐ set impossibly high standards for future goals and feel overwhelmed by the pressure to achieve them
- ☐ are so focused on reaching your future goals that you forget to enjoy the journey
- ☐ get so caught up in worries you find it difficult to enjoy the present moment
- ☐ find it challenging to trust that things will work out without excessive planning
- ☐ worry about future regrets or missed opportunities
- ☐ frequently ask others for reassurance about your future decisions or plans

_____ checked

When you make mistakes, do you…

- ☐ often dwell on past mistakes or regrets, making it hard to let them go
- ☐ replay scenarios in your head, thinking about how things could have gone differently
- ☐ feel embarrassed or ashamed about past errors, even if they were minor
- ☐ have difficulty forgiving yourself for past mistakes or perceived failures
- ☐ think other people judge you for your past mistakes, even if they don't know about them
- ☐ avoid taking risks or trying new things because you fear making mistakes

☐ dwell on past criticism or negative feedback, even if it was constructive

☐ frequently feel the need to explain or justify your past actions to others

☐ have difficulty accepting that making mistakes is a natural part of life

☐ carry past mistakes with you that impact your self-esteem and confidence

_____ checked

If you've experienced trauma, do you…

☐ keep thinking about how you could have avoided the traumatic event

☐ wonder if seeking help is worth the risk of not being believed

☐ constantly replay the traumatic event in your mind and feel overwhelmed by its lasting impact

☐ experience intrusive thoughts related to a traumatic event

☐ have recurring nightmares or distressing dreams related to past trauma

_____ checked

TOTAL CHECKED: _____ out of 45

Many of us deal with racing thoughts and mental chatter from time to time, but if you checked fifteen or more boxes, it's likely your thoughts are unproductive. The difference is that people with unproductive thinking *often* deal with excessive mental chatter and racing thoughts, making life harder

than it needs to be and leading to both mental and physical health issues.

For example, if you're tired after socializing because you keep analyzing everything you said and did, you might start avoiding social situations altogether. This can lead to loneliness, strain relationships, and cause or heighten social anxiety.

If you are constantly filled with mental noise, you'll likely have trouble concentrating, feel stuck, and give up on goals. You'll not only feel mentally exhausted but also less happy and confident.

Unproductive thinkers often struggle to enjoy the present moment, falling into cycles of worrying about the past or future. This ongoing worry can lead to restlessness, difficulty sleeping, and anxiety-related symptoms, like headaches and tense muscles. The physical symptoms make it hard to stay active, intensifying unproductive thoughts, since physical activity helps clear the mind. This self-perpetuating cycle is demotivating and leaves even the most driven individuals feeling hopeless. Breaking free from this pattern is crucial for reclaiming mental well-being and building a more satisfying life.

Who This Book Is For

This book is not just about identifying unproductive thoughts; it's a guide to transforming your mental landscape and reclaiming control over your life. While directed toward those struggling with repetitive and unwanted thoughts, it is equally valuable for anyone seeking to improve their mindset and make lasting and positive change.

Even though "overthinking" isn't considered a mental illness, it can worsen depression and anxiety, and is linked to c-PTSD (complex PTSD) and PTSD.[2] Mastering the skill of nurturing productive thoughts not only equips you with the

tools to combat "overthinking" but also unlocks the potential for a more fulfilling and resilient mindset.

The Stats

To understand why people tend to "overthink," and pinpoint the most common types of unproductive thoughts that lead to mental chatter, I went to the source and asked "overthinkers" *why* they overthink. To keep it authentic, I collected insights in a relaxed format using social media for its original purpose: connection. A simple prompt was posted in different forums on multiple social media sites: "I'm working on a book about overcoming overthinking. If you're prone to overthink, would you share what you overthink about?"

From there, I used my experience of over a decade in tech operations to aggregate the responses from more than 300 overthinkers and get what we call in the industry, "strategic insights." Responses were first put into two main categories: overthinking and rumination. Though these terms are often used interchangeably, "overthinking" involves fixating on the future while "rumination" centers around dwelling on the past (both signify unproductive thoughts).

Interestingly, 83 percent of respondents reported thinking about the future, while only 17 percent ruminated on the past. Responses were then separated into common triggers.

TRIGGERS	OVERTHINKING	RUMINATION
Social Interactions	40%	60%
Day-to-Day Planning	31%	–
Future Planning	29%	–
Perceived Mistakes	–	24%
Trauma	–	8%
Philosophical Pondering	–	8%

Social interactions, such as replaying past conversations, worrying about other people's opinions, being mindful not to offend anyone, setting up appointments, dating, and interacting with coworkers, were the most common things people repeatedly thought about. Next came everyday concerns like deciding what to have for dinner, whether to make an expensive purchase, and handling new parenting challenges. Lastly, planning for the future, considering a career change, furthering education, organizing a vacation, and buying presents were the third most common things people shared.

About a quarter of rumination involved dwelling on mistakes, such as saying or doing something silly or buying something just before it went on sale. Reflecting on past experiences, such as feeling manipulated, traumatic events like car accidents, and contemplating deeper aspects of life, such as wondering why people do the things they do, each accounted for about 8 percent of the time spent ruminating.

The Insights

Concepts commonly associated with "overthinking," such as fear, control, and perfectionism, were present in most responses. However, all responses indicated either a fixed mindset, unhelpful thinking habits known as "cognitive distortions," or low self-confidence. Many of them displayed two or more of these elements.

For example, if you often worry about whether you should pursue a goal or if you'll succeed, it's probably due to a lack of confidence and a cognitive distortion called "should thinking." If you excessively dwell on every social interaction regardless of its importance, it likely comes from having a fixed mindset and low self-confidence. And if you believe that you can never move past a mistake you made, it's likely due to a fixed

mindset and the cognitive distortion known as "all-or-nothing" thinking.

These concepts, which we'll call "root causes," suggest that fixed mindsets, unhelpful thinking habits, and low self-confidence are the main reasons for repetitive and unproductive thoughts. By creating a growth mindset, emphasizing balanced thinking, and boosting your confidence, you will develop productive thought habits and eliminate excessive thoughts altogether.

How I Found the "Overthinking" Cure

Identifying the root causes made me realize something I hadn't noticed before. I was already, unknowingly, working on the root causes, but I didn't realize that building a growth mindset, correcting cognitive distortions, and increasing my confidence were helping me stop my excessive, and seemingly never-ending thoughts. In fact, when I first started focusing on my mental health, it wasn't about managing thoughts; it was to make sure I didn't end up in jail.

My story is like many others who don't realize they have depression, c-PTSD, or anxiety that controls their lives. I slept a lot, thought it was cool to hate everyone, worked and drank too much. This was my normal so seeking help didn't even cross my mind. I was in my "comfort zone" and had no idea I was a miserable workaholic, people-pleasing perfectionist with no boundaries, crippling social anxiety, and low confidence who drank her feelings.

Then came the anger. It was intense and I couldn't seem to shake it. Scared I might lose my cool and end up in trouble, I would watch prison-related TV shows as an odd reminder not to do something dumb. People who know me find it hard to believe the woman who sometimes sounds like *Schitt's Creek*'s Alexis Rose could be so angry. I am naturally a silly (and

sometimes annoyingly happy) person, so reaching this point truly highlighted how far I was from myself.

In an attempt to return to me, I tried things like exercise, yoga, and journaling. They helped a bit, but I was still that angry, people-pleasing perfectionist who worked, drank, and worried too much—just now with smaller-size jeans (from all the exercise) and prettier penmanship (from all the journaling).

Out of sheer desperation, I went to therapy. Growing up I was taught that therapy was for losers who want to blame their parents, so I felt like a coward. Finding the right therapist was tough. I walked out on one mid-session. Others didn't think they could help me, labeling me one of the worst cases of childhood abuse they had ever seen.

Then I finally caught a break—a child therapist who specializes in cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). At work I was managing and negotiating millions of dollars' worth of contracts and talking with CEOs and executive leadership. Then I would drive to my new therapist's office and sit in the colorful waiting room with toys and dollhouses for the pediatric patients.

While I was grateful to have one hour a week to talk about my feelings, and my new therapist was helping me a lot, it felt painfully slow and not enough to make the significant impact I needed. Seeing my frustration, my therapist recommended a book that completely changed how I approached healing—*Codependent No More* by Melody Beatty.

The book helped me understand my behavior in relationships, but it was how the book made me feel that had the most impact. I felt seen and heard. And for the first time in a long time, I felt hope.

This newfound empowerment was addictive. I started researching and reading a book a week, exploring various topics like philosophy, psychology, spirituality, law of attraction, and

stoicism. I got certifications in different cognitive behavioral techniques and emotional intelligence. And I evolved from being someone who would hide self-help book covers out of embarrassment to someone who would read a bold-titled therapy workbook in public without shame. Unfortunately, like therapy, the techniques in those workbooks were good, but I noticed a lot of gaps and could see that I needed something more to work past the trauma and come back to myself.

So I started making connections, creating hypotheses and testing out new techniques. I saw my mind as a laboratory and I was the test subject. Like the month I prioritized focusing primarily on what I could, could somewhat, and could not control.[3] Or the time I hypothesized that since soldiers who return to their platoons quickly after experiencing a traumatic event are less likely to suffer severe PTSD,[4] maybe if I visualized people helping me in my flashbacks and maladaptive daydreams, the flashbacks and daydreams would go away. They did. Almost instantly.

The night terrors took a little longer to break. But with a combination of Carl Jung's dream theory (which suggests dreams help us tap into our unconscious mind),[5] and the philosophy of trauma specialist Dr. Judith Herman (emphasizing the importance of empowerment in trauma recovery),[6] along with some trial and error, they went away for good in August 2020.

Reflecting on my thoughts and finding new ways to improve my mental health became one of my favorite things to do. Instead of ignoring strange or upsetting thoughts, I'd embrace them and try to understand their meaning. I had fun being creative, inventing new techniques, and experimenting to see what worked. My therapist told me I was speeding through the therapeutic process. It felt good to hear, but the most important thing was that I was coming back to myself.

Life got better in every way, and I wanted to share what I had learned. At work, I led a seminar on emotional intelligence that caught the attention of the human resource department; they asked me to teach it company-wide. In my personal life, friends sought my advice, and I'd guide them toward a different perspective. Witnessing them make connections, think healthier, and rediscover themselves was more rewarding than any financial raise or accolade I had ever received. Motivated to reach a wider audience and share what I had learned, I began writing.

Writers in the writing groups loved hearing me break down complex topics in a simple form. One psychologist in the group said he wished all of his colleagues could write about cognitive topics in such a straightforward and approachable way—a skill I contribute to over a decade of explaining complex legal topics to stressed-out sales people who had millions of other things going on and a boss asking about their quota.

Even though there is still so much more for me to learn about psychology and philosophy, in May 2021, I found out that I had learned and experimented enough to go into remission for c-PTSD, depression, and anxiety. Remission means that the symptoms no longer have a significant impact on your life, so you would no longer receive a diagnosis for those conditions. Soon after, I did something I thought I would never do. I let go of the rage that led me on this journey and I forgave the people who mistreated me.

Throughout everything, one thing stayed constant. I kept thinking about the life-changing power of prioritizing healthy and productive thoughts. I strongly believe that by examining our thoughts, we can address common problems people face, such as stress, anxiety, and even physical goals like losing weight. I would go so far as to say that if people paid more

attention to creating healthy thoughts, we would solve the mental health crisis and change the world.

With this epiphany, I couldn't shake the feeling that I needed to do something. I really wanted to make something fun and accessible to help people learn this incredible knowledge that saved my life, helped me reconnect with myself, and defy current medical standards. So I left an established career that I spent most of my life building and I started writing books to empower others through thoughts. But to me, this is more than just a book; it's a celebration of how far I've come, all while helping you find yourself again.

Book Setup

The book is split into two sections. Part One teaches you how to recognize unproductive thinking in your mindset and offers a straightforward, yet powerful technique to support your efforts.

In Part Two, you will discover The 7 Rules of Productive Thinking, including additional methods to help calm and reframe your thoughts. Since these techniques are more impactful with practice, I've also included a "template" section at the end of the book. There you will find structured exercises you can use as a supportive thought journal.

It Takes Two

By following these general tips, you'll not only gain valuable insights but also create a journey of personal growth:

- Keeping an open mind helps you build confidence while navigating new topics. Read this book in the voice of a friend who cares about you and wants to see you succeed. This will help you embrace new ideas and ways of thinking.

- Applying what you learn is powerful. The book includes examples and writing activities to enhance your understanding. You don't *have* to do each writing exercise, but at least thoughtfully consider them.

- Repetition is key for understanding and learning new ideas. Reinforce your learning by practicing exercises and taking notes using the blank pages and spaces throughout the book.

- Growing starts by recognizing what we need to work on. Be honest with yourself when you're thinking about your strengths and weaknesses; this honesty is a powerful tool for personal growth.

- What you learn will help you to better communicate with a therapist. While you can reduce unproductive thoughts without therapy, there is no shame in seeking extra support.

Value Setting

Since thoughts are most productive when aligned with your values,[7] as you work to create more productive thoughts, it's beneficial to use your values, the principles that motivate and drive your decisions, as a guiding force.

Below are twenty personal values. Circle three that resonate with you the most right now. If picking just three seems challenging, keep in mind that one value can lead to another. For example, love may bring friendship and exciting experiences, while success could bring achievements and respect.

Integrity	Adventure	Respect	Justice
Loyalty	Independence	Responsibility	Creativity
Courage	Authenticity	Friendship	Kindness
Love	Honesty	Success	Security
Spirituality	Compassion	Achievement	Leadership

Now, write each selected value and a brief explanation of why it is significant in your life. How does it influence your decisions? What does it represent to you?

Value _____

Is important to me because:

Value _____

Is important to me because:

Value _____

Is important to me because:

Sometimes our thoughts are unproductive because we lose sight of what truly matters to us. We get stuck focusing on trivial things, that deep down, we know we don't really care about. Reconnecting with, and embracing your values, helps you stay focused on what's really important. It will create a level of depth and fulfillment that will reduce stress and help you feel more confident and connected.

While this technique reminded you of your values, it's now up to you to stay tuned in. While seemingly simple, even the most value-driven people can get sidetracked. The key is to continually keep your values front and center by asking

questions like, "Does this align with my values?" before making decisions.

PART ONE

The Root Causes

Marcus was really looking forward to dinner at his favorite restaurant. When the friendly server told him, "Enjoy your meal," he replied, "You too!" without hesitation.

As soon as the words left his mouth, he felt instant regret and a wave of embarrassment. A simple slip of the tongue quickly snowballed into a whirlwind of thinking. Marcus's thoughts spiraled and his inner critic went into overdrive. *Why did I say that? It was so awkward. The server must think I'm an idiot. I should have just said 'thank you.' What if the server tells the kitchen staff and they are all laughing at me?*

Throughout dinner, Marcus couldn't shake his self-consciousness. He kept replaying the moment in his head, cringing each time he revisited it. He even considered leaving a bigger tip in hopes it would make the server like him.

Later that night, Marcus found himself googling "how to recover from a 'you too' moment." His mind raced as he spent the night reading through countless forum threads with similar stories.

In the days that followed, Marcus kept replaying the incident in his mind. He told himself that people are either good at socializing or they are not, and that he never will be. He wondered if he should avoid going back to that restaurant just to save himself from feeling embarrassed. He soon began practicing what he would say if he saw the server again.

<p style="text-align:center">✶✶✶✶</p>

Poor Marcus. We will use his story to identify the root causes of unproductive thinking and suggest better ways to think. But first, let's talk about thoughts and how we get them in the first place.

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