

Lost in your own thoughts? Here's how to find a way out.

# OVERTHINKING

Your friend barely talks to you during the morning bus ride to school. Do you assume she's still half asleep and will perk up later? Or does your thought process go more like this: 'She's realised I'm not cool enough to hang with because of that time I said I liked watching *Hannah Montana* still and everyone laughed. I bet they've all decided that they don't want to hang with me anymore. I knew there was a weird vibe when we were texting last night. They probably all decided to ditch me after I went to bed. I told my parents not letting me have my phone on at night would ruin my life.'

## Think, think, think

Aargh! If that sounded familiar – you may be an overthinker. "Overthinking can rob you of being present in the moment and instead hold you captive in your brain," says Dr Elizabeth Seeley-Wait, Clinical Psychologist and Director of The Children's Psychology Clinic. There are a few different forms overthinking can take. You might repeatedly go over stuff that's already happened, agonise over the future and obsessively go through scenarios of what could happen, or you might get stuck in overthinking the present and be unable to speak up in class or join a conversation.

Anyone who's been there knows how bad it feels – like you're stuck in mud and spinning your wheels to get out only digs you in deeper – but it's important to understand that there could be more serious consequences. According to Dr Elizabeth, as well as stressing you out and keeping you from getting things done, overthinking can lead to both depression and anxiety.

## Why do we do it?

The answer is in the word itself. Drop the 'over' and we're left with 'thinking', which is, you know, a good thing! "Evolutionarily speaking, thinking through scenarios for the future and even learning from our past experiences are actions that would make us more likely to survive," Dr Elizabeth points out. Beyond survival, thinking stuff through before an event increases our chances of success because it allows us to rehearse how it might go and plan accordingly. Analysing an event after it happened is useful because it allows us to learn from our mistakes and successes and get better at stuff. Yay thinking!

The problem occurs when you can't stop. Sure, you should learn from what went wrong in that job interview, but once you've noted the mistake, you need to be able to move on. It's also a problem if you're putting as much thought into minor matters as important ones. Spending hours preparing for an exam makes sense – spending hours writing and rewriting an Instagram caption doesn't. In other words, the difference between thinking and overthinking is one of proportion. If you think you do it too much and it stresses you – and you feel you can't stop, that's a problem according to Dr Elizabeth.



# Help!

If you've now started spiralling into thoughts about how doomed your future is because of your overthinking habit, stop! Breathe! This is totally fixable. Read on for Dr Elizabeth's brilliant tips to break free of those mental loops.

- **When you catch yourself overthinking, congratulate yourself.** Being able to notice it and name it is an important step in being able to change. Don't judge yourself harshly, just take a few deep breaths and tell yourself, 'That's overthinking'.
- **Shift your thoughts to the present moment.** Were you about to make a sandwich and watch a TV show? Nudge your mind into thinking

about that by narrating to yourself your next moves. Like: 'OK, let's go make that sandwich and watch *PLL*... what's better, Vegemite or ham?'

- **Engage all of your senses in order to stay in the moment and shift your mind from future-thinking or past-thinking.** Smell the bread, feel the couch, listen intently to what's happening on the show.
- **When you catch yourself overthinking again, repeat these steps.** Focus on what you're doing now. Remember wherever your body is, your mind can be there too. Practise this whenever you need to!

# W O R K I N G I T

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## If all else fails...

If you feel you can't quite gain control of your overthinking on your own, don't be afraid to ask for help from your parents, your school counsellor or [KidsHelpline.com.au](http://KidsHelpline.com.au). You'll find that overthinking is super common and there's no shame at all in needing a bit of outside help to train your brain to stop spinning its wheels so that you can move forward with thoughtfulness (but not too much).

