

Overcoming Overthinking: Psychological Strategies for a Calmer Mind

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ABSTRACT

Overthinking or the tendency to overthink is a psychological phenomenon that is increasingly common in modern society. This study aims to deeply understand the individual experience in dealing with overthinking and the psychological strategies used to overcome it. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with 8 informants aged 20–35 years who had participated in interventions such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), mindfulness, or other relaxation techniques. The results of thematic analysis showed that overthinking was triggered by uncertainty about the future, social pressure, and fear of failure, and had an impact on mental and physical health. The strategies used included cognitive (cognitive restructuring, journaling), emotional (mindfulness, meditation), and behavioral (diversionary activities, healthy routines) approaches. Although effective, these strategies have limitations in terms of consistency and social support. This study emphasizes the importance of an integrative approach based on CBT and mindfulness in overcoming overthinking and encouraging mental health policies that are more responsive to the psychosocial dynamics of modern society.

Keywords: overthinking, CBT, mindfulness, psychological strategies, cognitive stress

INTRODUCTION

Overthinking or in scientific terms known as rumination (repeating past memories) and worry (worrying about the future), is a form of perseverative cognition, a repetitive cognitive process that continuously focuses thoughts on negative things in the past and future (Ottaviani et al., 2016)

Not only does this pattern have an emotional impact, it often traps the body in a chronic stress response that weakens the cardiovascular and neuroendocrine systems and increases levels of stress hormones such as cortisone.

A meta-analysis of 43 studies with 3,348 participants revealed that rumination induction related to either sadness or anger resulted in significant spikes in blood pressure and heart rate (effect size, $d = 0.75–1.39$) (Busch et al., 2017).



Similarly, experimental studies have shown that repeated thoughts after stress trigger high blood pressure even after the initial stress has passed, as well as slowing down the body's recovery from conditions such as HRV (heart rate variability).

In fact, in everyday life, work-related rumination levels have been shown to decrease the body's parasympathetic response (HRV) at night, indicating that overthinking works all the time, not just when stress is running (Cropley et al., 2017). Direct studies show slow recovery times in individuals who tend to overthink, both trait and state rumination, this has the potential to facilitate the emergence of hypertension and chronic heart disease (Siti, 2022).

Overthinking, or the habit of thinking excessively, has become an increasingly common psychological phenomenon in modern society. Amidst the rapid flow of information, high social pressure, and complex demands of life, many individuals are trapped in the habit of thinking about everything for a long time, both things that have happened and things that will not necessarily happen. Thoughts that constantly replay past events or imagine bad scenarios in the future create mental stress that is not only emotionally exhausting but also has a negative impact on physical health and overall quality of life. Although often considered a form of caution or self-reflection, overthinking often brings more harm than good (Fathurrahman, 2021).

Psychologically, overthinking is divided into two main forms: rumination, which is the tendency to continue thinking about past mistakes or failures, and worry, which is excessive worry about the future. Both forms have the same characteristics, namely repetitive, unproductive, and difficult to stop. In many cases, overthinking does not produce solutions, but rather creates a cycle of negative thoughts that worsen stress, weaken self-confidence, and increase the risk of psychological disorders. It is not surprising that various studies show that overthinking is one of the main risk factors for anxiety disorders, depression (major depressive disorder), sleep disorders (insomnia), and even burnout in the workplace.

Research by Susan Nolen-Hoeksema (2000), a cognitive psychology expert, shows that individuals who tend to ruminate are at higher risk of experiencing depressive disorders, especially because they are unable to stop the flow of negative thoughts and tend to focus on personal weaknesses or failures. Furthermore, rumination and worry have been associated with overactive brain activity in areas related to threat response and cognitive control, causing the brain to be in a state of "danger alert". Even from a biological perspective, the habit of overthinking can increase stress hormone levels (cortisol), speed up the heart rate, reduce endurance, and in the long term can trigger health problems such as hypertension and heart problems.

The phenomenon of overthinking does not only occur among adults. Currently, many teenagers and students also experience high psychological pressure due to academic demands, social expectations, and anxiety about the future. The younger generation lives in a world full of competition and expectations, often accompanied by social media exposure that compares personal lives with the achievements of others (Antika & Sartika, 2025). As a result, overthinking becomes a kind of mental response that appears as a form of existential anxiety: am I good enough? is my decision right? will my future be safe? If not handled properly, overthinking in youth can develop into a serious psychological disorder in adulthood (Andriese, 2025)

However, the good news is that overthinking is not a permanent or unchangeable condition. In many contemporary psychological approaches, overthinking is seen as a thought pattern that can be recognized, retrained, and controlled. One of the most effective

approaches is Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), which helps individuals recognize irrational thought patterns and replace them with more realistic ways of thinking. CBT has been shown to be effective in reducing symptoms of anxiety and depression by training patients to realize that not all thoughts should be believed. In addition to CBT, Metacognitive Therapy (MCT) is also widely used to treat overthinking, especially by focusing on how a person perceives their own thoughts (metacognition). MCT helps patients realize that overthinking something is not a sign of alertness, but rather a mental trap that needs to be stopped (Tohir et al., 2025).

In addition to therapy-based interventions, mindfulness-based approaches have also been shown to be effective in reducing the intensity of overthinking. Mindfulness teaches a person to be fully present in the present moment without judging the thoughts or feelings that arise. By practicing full awareness and acceptance of internal experiences, individuals become better able to observe their thoughts without getting caught up in the flow of negative thoughts. Research has shown that consistent mindfulness practice for 8 weeks can reduce the tendency to rumination, increase inner calm, and improve emotional balance and sleep (Puspitasari, 2023).

This article will comprehensively discuss the phenomenon of overthinking from a psychological perspective, including its causes, impacts on mental and physical health, and effective strategies to manage it. The main focus will be directed at practical, evidence-based approaches that can be applied in everyday life. By understanding how overthinking works and how to deal with it, readers are expected to be able to build mental skills to respond to life's challenges more calmly, wisely, and emotionally healthy. Because in the end, a calm mind does not mean being without problems, but the ability to stay clear in the midst of a storm of thoughts.

METHOD

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach that aims to describe and understand the phenomenon of overthinking and the psychological strategies used by individuals to overcome it. Informants were selected purposively, namely those aged 20–35 years and have significant experience in dealing with overthinking, and have participated in interventions such as CBT, mindfulness, or other relaxation techniques. Data collection was conducted through semi-structured in-depth interviews with 5 to 8 informants. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis techniques to identify common patterns in the experiences and strategies used by informants. To maintain the validity of the data, researchers used triangulation and member checks to ensure that the results of the analysis accurately reflect the informant's original experiences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

1. Overview of Overthinking Experience

Based on in-depth interviews with eight informants aged 20–35 years, it was found that overthinking emerged as a response to situations that were considered complex, full of uncertainty, and demanding important decisions (Fachri, 2024). The informants described the experience of overthinking as a repetitive, unproductive thinking activity that often leads to prolonged anxiety or stress. One informant said, “I often think about one small mistake over and over again, even for hours, as if it would destroy everything.” This statement reflects the typical characteristics of overthinking, namely rumination (repeated contemplation of problems) and worry (excessive worry

about the future), as stated in the theory by Nolen-Hoeksema (2000).

This overthinking phenomenon is also reinforced by narratives that show its impact on daily life, such as impaired work concentration, sleep disturbances, and decreased quality of social relations. Several informants even admitted to experiencing psychosomatic symptoms, such as headaches and digestive disorders, due to stress caused by this excessive thinking pattern. This finding is in line with previous research by Lyubomirsky et al. (2003) which states that overthinking can worsen mental and physical health if not treated immediately.

2. Main Triggers for Overthinking

In the process of thematic analysis of in-depth interview data, consistent patterns emerged regarding the factors that trigger overthinking in informants. The three main triggers that were most dominantly found were uncertainty about the future, social pressure, and fear of failure. The three are interrelated and form a psychological cycle that triggers the tendency to overthink continuously (Walidaini, 2025). First, uncertainty about the future is the main source of anxiety that drives overthinking. Informants admitted to often being trapped in repetitive thoughts about possible bad scenarios in the future, such as career failure, financial problems, or uncertainty in personal relationships. Some of them expressed feelings of being unable to control their lives because there were too many uncertain variables. "Sometimes I feel like there are too many things that can go wrong, and I don't know where to start," said one informant. This shows that individuals who are in a transitional phase of life such as early adulthood tend to be more susceptible to overthinking because of the burden of responsibility and unclear expectations for the future.

In the context of existential psychology, Yalom (1980) explains that anxiety about the future is part of basic human anxiety that arises when individuals realize that life is full of uncertainty and choices that determine fate. This uncertainty creates a tendency to overanalyze everything, in an effort to gain a false sense of security or certainty. Unfortunately, this process often causes mental fatigue and decreased self-confidence, because individuals feel they are never truly ready to face the risks or consequences of their choices. Second, social pressure, both from family and the surrounding environment, also plays a big role in exacerbating overthinking. Informants consistently stated that expectations from parents, peers, and community culture about success, achievement, and self-image added to their mental burden. One informant said, "I feel like I have to look successful at a young age, like my friends on Instagram. If not, I feel like a failure and start to question all my decisions." This statement illustrates how social media creates the illusion of perfect success, so that individuals feel left behind or not good enough, even though everyone has a different life path.

Pressure from social media also causes the phenomenon of comparison anxiety, which is anxiety that arises from constantly comparing oneself with others. This situation creates a psychological condition in which individuals feel they must always be in an ideal standard, with no room to make mistakes or accept their limitations. Informants stated that they tend to overthink every small decision in life, for fear of being seen as a failure by others. This kind of pressure is one of the main triggers for overthinking, especially among the younger generation whose lives are very connected to the digital world (Widirahayu et al., 2024).

Third, fear of failure is a dominant source of overthinking, especially for individuals who have high perfectionism or tend to set unrealistic self-standards. This

fear often appears in the form of self-doubt, guilt over past mistakes, or excessive anxiety about the negative consequences of decisions made. Several informants described that they often spent hours just thinking about the bad possibilities of a choice, even though it might not happen. "I'm afraid of making a mistake that I'll regret later. So I keep thinking and thinking, until I end up doing nothing," said one of them. This condition shows a pattern of avoidance behavior, namely the tendency to avoid action because of fear of negative consequences. Ironically, this avoidance actually prolongs the cycle of overthinking because the individual continues to be in uncertainty and has not resolved his main problem. In the long term, this condition can cause psychological stagnation and weaken self-confidence (Puspitasari, 2023).

In addition to the three main triggers above, this study also found other triggers that, although not dominant, are significant in certain cases. Among them are past traumatic experiences, authoritarian parenting, and extreme academic or professional pressure. An informant linked his tendency to overthink to childhood experiences when he was often scolded for making his own decisions. This shows that past experiences can also form cognitive patterns full of doubt and anxiety in making decisions, which then develop into overthinking in adulthood. Overall, these findings confirm that overthinking is not a stand-alone psychological problem, but rather a manifestation of the complexity of modern life pressures related to self-identity, social relationships, and existential meaning. Therefore, handling overthinking is not enough with an individual approach such as relaxation techniques, but also requires social and cultural awareness to create a more supportive environment and not pressure individuals with excessive expectations (Miftakhuddin et al., 2020).

3. Psychological Strategies to Overcome Overthinking

Based on the experiences of informants, it was found that there are various psychological strategies used to overcome overthinking. Broadly speaking, these strategies can be classified into three major categories: cognitive, emotional, and behavioral (Izah, 2022).

3.1 Cognitive Strategies

The most commonly used cognitive strategy is cognitive restructuring, which is widely studied in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) interventions. Informants who have participated in CBT sessions said that they learned to recognize cognitive distortions such as overgeneralization, black-and-white thinking, and negative assumptions about the future. "I learned to identify irrational thoughts and replace them with more realistic thoughts. It really helped me control excessive thoughts," said one informant (Hawa, 2022).

Another strategy used is journaling or writing a daily journal, as a form of reflection on the thoughts and emotions being felt. This activity helps them evaluate their thoughts objectively and create emotional distance from the problems they face. This finding is in accordance with the results of Pennebaker's study (1997) which showed that written expression of emotional experiences can help the process of self-regulation and improve mental well-being (Susilo & Anggapuspa, 2024).

3.2. Emotional Strategy

In the emotional realm, mindfulness and meditation practices are quite dominant strategies. Informants who have attended mindfulness training stated that they were able

to direct their attention to the present moment and free themselves from the trap of recurring negative thoughts. One informant said, "Mindfulness makes me aware that my thoughts are not reality. They are just reactions, and I can choose not to believe them." (Pradnya et al., 2024)

Mindfulness not only plays a role in calming the mind, but also in fostering acceptance of the uncertainties of life. Techniques such as conscious breathing, body scans, and observing thoughts without judgment have been shown to be effective in reducing the frequency of overthinking. This is reinforced by Kabat-Zinn's (2003) research which shows that mindfulness practices can significantly reduce symptoms of anxiety and stress.

3.3. Behavioral Strategy

In addition to cognitive and emotional approaches, informants also use behavioral strategies such as diverting attention through physical activity, art, or social engagement. Activities such as exercising, painting, or talking to friends are believed to relieve mental stress caused by overthinking. "If I start to overthink, I immediately go jogging or draw. It helps me release negative energy," said an informant (Indrawati, 2021).

Some informants also adopted healthy routines, such as getting enough sleep, managing screen time, and limiting social media consumption which often triggers social comparison. This strategy is related to the principle of behavioral activation, where individuals are encouraged to engage in enjoyable and meaningful activities as a way to balance negative emotions.

4. Effectiveness and Limitations of Strategy

Although various psychological strategies have been applied by informants to overcome overthinking, the results of the study show that the effectiveness of each approach varies greatly depending on the characteristics and conditions of the individual. Not all informants feel the benefits of these strategies consistently or sustainably. Some admit to experiencing obstacles in maintaining routine practices such as mindfulness, meditation, or journaling (Saifuddin, 2023). Work demands, academic busyness, and limited time and energy are often the main factors that disrupt the continuity of these practices. One informant stated, "I know meditation helps, but sometimes I'm too tired to do it, and end up getting caught up in my own thoughts again." Lack of social support is also a limiting factor in the success of this strategy. Individuals who do not have a supportive environment or cannot share their emotional burden with those closest to them tend to find it more difficult to maintain strategies that require persistence, such as independent CBT or journal reflection. For some informants, practices such as journaling actually bring back negative emotions that have not been fully resolved, especially if done without professional guidance. In this context, it is important to note that some strategies that seem simple on the surface actually require adequate emotional readiness and cognitive capacity to produce positive impacts.

In addition, the effectiveness of the strategy is also influenced by internal factors such as motivation, personality structure, and level of self-awareness. Individuals who tend to have a perfectionist or high-control mindset sometimes find it difficult to let go of the need to "get it all figured out," even when practicing mindfulness (Asih et al., 2018). In such cases, the practice is actually counterproductive because it encourages new pressure on oneself. Informants who have a reflective personality and are open to the growth process tend to be more adaptable and benefit from the strategies applied.

Nevertheless, most informants stated that self-awareness-based interventions such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and mindfulness have a real positive impact, especially in reducing the frequency of overthinking and increasing the ability to manage emotional reactions (Gofar, 2023). Those who have attended professional CBT sessions said that this approach helped them identify negative thought patterns that had not been realized, as well as train the ability to challenge and replace them with more rational and constructive thoughts. CBT is considered effective because it is structured and focuses on problem solving, which is in accordance with the needs of individuals who tend to get caught in repetitive thought cycles.

Likewise with mindfulness, many informants felt helped by the practice of present moment awareness because it gave the mind space to “rest” from internal pressure. This practice not only helps reduce the intensity of negative emotions, but also builds metacognitive skills, the ability to be aware of and observe thoughts without having to react to them. One informant said, “Mindfulness makes me realize that not all thoughts have to be responded to. Sometimes it is enough to just observe them, then let them go.” This statement reflects an important shift in thinking that can gradually reduce the tendency to overthink. However, the benefits of these strategies appear more significant in individuals who have the will to change, personal commitment, and a willingness to evaluate themselves honestly. Without these three factors, the practices carried out tend to be mere formalities without integration into everyday lifestyles. In addition, the presence of a facilitator or professional companion such as a psychologist or counselor has also been shown to strengthen the success of the strategy. Individuals who receive guidance tend to be more disciplined, focused, and able to face internal obstacles with the right support (Rofiq, 2017).

In this context, it is important to emphasize that there is no single approach that can be a universal solution for all individuals who experience overthinking. Instead, a flexible and adaptive approach is needed, tailored to the dynamics of each person and their environment. A combination of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral strategies complemented by a social support system is key to building mental resilience and reducing the tendency to overthink. Overall, the results of this study underline the importance of an integrative and sustainable psychological approach. Strategies such as CBT, mindfulness, journaling, and diversion activities can be very effective tools, but their implementation must take into account the individual's readiness, supportive environment, and appropriate guidance. Overthinking, as a complex psychological phenomenon, requires holistic treatment, not only on the aspect of symptoms, but also the root causes and the accompanying support systems (Winarso, 2024).

5. Theoretical Reflection and Practical Implications

The findings in this study strengthen the assumption that overthinking is not just a negative thinking habit that can be stopped with intention alone, but rather a complex psychological response to the dynamics of modern life full of pressure. Overthinking appears as an individual's adaptive reaction to a combination of internal factors such as low self-esteem, perfectionist personal standards, need for control, and emotional sensitivity and external factors such as social pressure, economic uncertainty, career demands, and cultural expectations about success and life achievement. The interaction between these internal and external factors creates psychological conditions that trigger repetitive thinking cycles, feelings of insecurity, and the inability to make decisions calmly (Yusdiana, 2023).

In the context of cognitive and existential psychology theory, the results of this study support the view that overthinking cannot be separated from the dynamics of self-identity and the meaning of life. Individuals who experience overthinking are often in a phase of searching for meaning, between expectations and realities that are not in harmony (Husni, 2023). This makes them vulnerable to existential anxiety, as stated by Viktor Frankl (1985) and Irvin Yalom (1980), that the emptiness of meaning and existential pressure drive humans to be trapped in a stagnant cognitive process, one of which is overthinking. Thus, overthinking is not only a symptom of anxiety or stress, but an expression of the search for psychological stability and control over an uncertain life. Theoretically, this study confirms the relevance and effectiveness of an integrative approach, especially the combination of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and mindfulness, as the most promising intervention model in dealing with overthinking. CBT provides a logical and systematic framework for identifying, challenging, and replacing irrational thoughts that fuel overthinking. On the other hand, mindfulness complements these approaches by teaching the skill of being present in the moment without judgment, helping individuals release emotional attachment to disturbing thoughts, and building an attitude of acceptance towards the uncertainties of life. The combination of these two approaches not only targets symptoms but also builds a healthier psychological foundation in the long term.

Furthermore, this integrative approach is considered flexible and can be adjusted to individual characteristics. Some informants who have a religious background, for example, find it easier to accept the concept of mindfulness when associated with spiritual values or religious practices such as *dhikr* or prayer meditation. Meanwhile, for those who tend to be analytical, the structure of CBT provides comfort in understanding the mechanisms of the mind. This suggests that tailoring interventions to individual personal values, culture, and beliefs is essential to increasing engagement and effectiveness of therapy. In psychological practice, these findings provide important practical implications, especially for mental health service providers, counselors, and clinical psychologists. First, the intervention approach to overthinking should not be monolithic or generic, but rather designed personally and contextually. Practitioners are expected to be able to integrate various therapy techniques flexibly and responsively to client needs (Weliangan, 2021). Second, education about mental health literacy, including recognizing symptoms of overthinking and how to manage them, needs to be improved, especially among the younger generation. This can be done through educational programs in schools, campuses, communities, or social media that provide information about stress management strategies and developing self-awareness. In addition, social support is also an important aspect that must be strengthened in the context of practical implementation. These findings indicate that individuals who have a supportive social network are better able to maintain the psychological strategies they implement. Therefore, it is important to encourage the creation of a social environment that is not only empathetic, but also opens up a healthy discussion space about mental health without stigma. The work environment, educational institutions, and hobby-based communities can play a significant role in creating a conducive atmosphere for individuals to develop resilience and positive reflective habits (Ilmi et al., 2025).

Finally, these findings also imply the importance of public policies that support systemic mental health services. The government, educational institutions, and the private sector need to work together to expand access to counseling services, emotion regulation training, and community-based psychological intervention facilities. In the long run,

investment in mental health will produce individuals who are more productive, resilient, and able to make clear decisions without getting caught in the trap of overthinking that weakens self-potential. Thus, theoretical reflections and practical implications of this study suggest that the approach to overthinking must be understood multidimensionally, not only as an individual psychological phenomenon, but also as part of a social construction that requires a collective, integrated, and sustainable response.

CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that overthinking is a psychological response that is not simply caused by negative thought patterns, but is influenced by a complex interaction between internal factors such as perfectionism, self-esteem, and emotional sensitivity, as well as external factors such as social pressure, cultural expectations, and uncertainty about the future. This phenomenon has a significant impact on an individual's mental health and well-being, affecting emotional, cognitive, and physical aspects. Various psychological strategies have been shown to be useful in overcoming overthinking, especially approaches based on Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and mindfulness. These two approaches complement each other in forming a more adaptive mindset and stronger self-awareness. In addition, behavioral strategies such as physical activity and routine management also support recovery from the overthinking cycle. However, the effectiveness of the strategy is highly dependent on personal readiness, consistency of practice, and the existence of a social support system. Thus, an integrative approach based on CBT and mindfulness can be used as a basis for intervention in mental health services, especially for the younger generation. This study also recommends the importance of mental health education in the community and the development of public policies that support the creation of a psychologically healthy environment, so that individuals are able to build resilience in dealing with life's pressures without getting caught up in prolonged overthinking.

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