

Don't Overthink It

Make Easier Decisions,
Stop Second-Guessing, and Bring
More Joy to Your Life

Anne Bogel



BakerBooks

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Baker Books
a division of Baker Publishing Group
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakerbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Bogel, Anne, 1978– author.

Title: Don't overthink it : make easier decisions, stop second-guessing, and bring more joy to your life / Anne Bogel.

Description: Grand Rapids, Michigan : Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2020. |

Identifiers: LCCN 2019033787 | ISBN 9780801094460 (paperback)

Subjects: LCSH: Thought and thinking.

Classification: LCC BF441 .B6255 2020 | DDC 158.1—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019033787>

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The author is represented by the William K. Jensen Literary Agency.

20 21 22 23 24 25 26 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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For
Jackson, Sarah,
Lucy, and Silas.



*My mission in life is not merely to survive, but to thrive;
and to do so with some passion, some compassion, some
humor, and some style.*

Maya Angelou

With the new day comes new strength and new thoughts.

Eleanor Roosevelt

*Be careful what you think, because your thoughts run your
life.*

Proverbs 4:23

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1

How We Spend Our Lives

*Far more than you may realize, your experience, your world,
and even your self are the creations of what you focus on.*

Winifred Gallagher

I'm scheduled to depart for Nashville in twenty-seven hours, and I can't stop refreshing the forecast. I have a million things to do before I leave—more than I can possibly accomplish—yet I persist in hitting refresh. I can see it's not helping; it's actually making things worse. Yet I keep doing it.

I'm driving south to work on a new project, one I've been planning for months. It wasn't easy to get the date on the calendar, but now it's finally here. My hotel has long been booked and my workbag is freshly packed. I've finalized my itinerary and downloaded a new audiobook for the drive. There's just one wild card: the weather.

All week long, I've been monitoring the volatile storms that threaten to derail my plans. The forecast is not for Southern summer pop-up storms but a massive front coming to blanket the region. My friend first noticed the situation at girls' night earlier this week. While we chatted and drank half-price glasses of wine, she peered over our shoulders at the silenced meteorologist on the bar's TV. "Hey, when do you leave for Nashville?" she asked. "That storm does *not* look good."

Because we've spent dozens of girls' nights discussing our fears, both rational and otherwise, my friends know I'm an uneasy road tripper even on sunny days, and I abhor driving through storms. And they know how, just weeks before, my family had been caught in the worst thunderstorm I'd ever experienced, right on that same stretch of I-65 I would soon be driving again, solo. We were headed to Florida for our annual beach week; my husband, Will, was behind the wheel. Usually I'd be reassured by his steady presence, but this time even he looked fearful. Construction walls meant we couldn't pull over, and the radar showed the rain wouldn't let up for hours. Visibility was practically zero, and I'd told my friends after the fact that it was a miracle we didn't end up in a hundred-car pileup on the interstate.

"Never again," I'd said as I recounted the story.

But the five-day forecast made a repeat performance look possible. Maybe *likely*. "You'd better keep an eye on that forecast," my friend said.

I've taken my friend's words to heart, perhaps too much. This week I've been checking the weather constantly, hoping the storm would dissipate or its path would shift. Neither sunny outcome has materialized.

Instead of fading out, the storm has intensified—along with my anxiety level.

Leaving early isn't an option. I have work to do at home in Louisville. I've also been traveling a lot this season and am not keen on the idea of leaving my family again. I don't want to miss another family dinner or my son's big baseball game on what promises to be a beautiful summer night.

But I don't see how I can drive two hundred miles in the storm.

So now I'm staring at my computer monitor, hoping against hope that my next click will deliver a happier version of reality. But each time, I don't like the new answer The Weather Channel serves up—and so I click again, and again. I make myself walk away from the computer to, you know, *actually accomplish something*, but I can't concentrate with the storm looming. So I sneak back to my screen and check again. I feel more agitated with every click.

Before long, I'm snared in the too-familiar spin cycle of overthinking, unable to focus on anything else. I know the signs: lots of mental action, none of it constructive, all the while knowing I have better things to do. All my mental energy is consumed by the forecast—which I can't do a thing about—instead of the things that actually need my attention.

The more I think about what to do, the less sure I am about the answer. *Should I leave now? Should I wait? Should I keep waiting and hoping?* The deeper I sink into my overthinking spiral, the less confident I feel about my *ability* to decide, and the specific problem in front of me mushrooms into a larger concern: What kind of idiot spends hours staring at The Weather Channel? Shouldn't a competent adult be able to make a simple decision? I'm in danger of losing all perspective, when the humor of it hits me. I text my friend this message:

Current situation: massively overthinking my trip to Nashville to begin work on a book tentatively titled *Don't Overthink It*.

Overthinking: What It Is, What It Isn't

Anyone who's picked up a book called *Don't Overthink It* can sympathize with me, because you've been there. You know what it feels like to get caught in a loop of unproductive—or even destructive—thought.

When we talk about overthinking, we're not talking about having our basic needs met, like a place to sleep or where we'll find our next meal. Those fundamental questions merit concern and require thought—sometimes lots of it. And we're not talking about major life decisions, like whether to change careers or end a relationship or move across the country. Big decisions like these require dedicated thought. When we talk about overthinking, we're talking about those times when we lavish mental energy on things that don't deserve it. Those times when we can't seem to think about anything else, even though we know our thoughts are better spent elsewhere.

Overthinking takes different forms. Sometimes it looks like worry. We might feel stuck reviewing something we've done in the past or imagining something that might happen in the future. We might spend twenty minutes leaping to imaginative and dire conclusions about that short email from our boss or the note from our child's teacher, or we may construct an elaborate and scary scenario in our mind about why our mom hasn't returned our call. We might lie awake at night wondering what our friends really think of us or if a loved one seems tired of us or if our library fines are getting really and truly out of control.

Sometimes overthinking looks like fretting about the small stuff, devoting disproportionate amounts of brain space to the relatively insignificant. We might catch ourselves in the middle of a long train of thought about whether we should exchange that new pair of jeans for the next size up, or why the washing machine water doesn't seem as hot as it used to and what we should do about it.

Sometimes overthinking looks like second-guessing ourselves. We put just-because flowers on the grocery list, but are they *really* worth the money? We're interested in that concert, but would we be better off with a night in? We want the kids to see the meteor shower, but will the loss of sleep be worth it? Seeing old friends is great, but will we regret using all our vacation time for the reunion? Waffling feels uncomfortable, but without any guiding principles or coherent philosophy, we can't seem to help ourselves.

Whether the concern elbowing into our thoughts is big or small, we recognize the common thread: these thoughts are repetitive, unhealthy, and unhelpful. Our brains are hard at work but accomplishing nothing. It is exhausting and makes us feel crappy. Dr. Susan Nolen-Hoeksema was a psychology professor at Yale whose research focused on women's mental health and well-being. Her studies over a twenty-year period showed that overthinking makes life harder, hurts our relationships, and may contribute to mental disorders like depression, severe anxiety, and alcohol abuse.

Overthinking also carries a significant opportunity cost. Mental energy is not a limitless resource. We have only so much to spend each day, and how we choose to spend it matters. As Annie Dillard writes, "How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives. What we do with this hour, and that one, is what we are doing."

When we spend our time overthinking, *that's what we're doing.*

Let's face it: nobody wants to live a life characterized by overthinking. But it doesn't feel like something we're *choosing*; it feels like something we can't escape. We don't want to fritter away our one precious life second-guessing ourselves about a conversation we had last Thursday or whether we're sick enough to go to the doctor or when we're going to squeeze in a Costco run this week. We want better for ourselves. But we're not sure how to get there.

A friend recently relayed some advice she'd read in a women's magazine that advised to squelch overthinking by resolving not to think about anything that stresses you after dinner. We laughed about this together. It sounds good, but how does one actually *do* it? If one could simply decide not to think about it, we wouldn't have an overthinking problem, would we?

Why is it so hard to untangle this one little thing that looms so large over our lives?

Overthinking Affects Women More Than Men

"We are suffering from an epidemic of overthinking," writes Nolen-Hoeksema. The problem is widespread and, thanks to a combination of neuroscience and socialization, especially plagues women. According to recent studies, women really do have more going on in their brains than men do. In 2017, researchers at the Amen Clinics released imaging data showing "the brains of women in the study were significantly more active in many more areas of the brain than men, especially in the prefrontal cortex, involved with focus and impulse control, and the limbic or emotional areas of the brain, involved with mood and anxiety."

This difference may be a key reason why women are more likely to ruminate, overanalyze, and become paralyzed by indecision. We perseverate instead of act, we worry, we second-guess ourselves. And, whether due to biology or socialization, we focus more on our emotional ties to others than men do. According to Nolen-Hoeksema:

Women can ruminate about anything and everything—our appearance, our families, our career, our health. We often feel that this is just a part of being a woman. . . . This may be partly true, but overthinking is also toxic for women. It interferes

with our ability and motivation to solve our problems. It drives some friends and family members away. And it can wreck our emotional health. Women are twice as likely as men to become severely depressed or anxious, and our tendency to overthink appears to be one of the reasons why.

More recent studies indicate that the problem is only becoming worse. One study analyzing birth cohort differences from 1989 to 2016 shows that, despite increased awareness of the dangers, perfectionism is increasing over time. Perfectionism is strongly linked to overthinking, as we'll explore in chapter 3, and the findings that today's young people face more competitive environments and more unrealistic expectations than those of previous generations does not mean good things for their mental or emotional well-being.

It doesn't have to be this way. We can—and must—learn to do better. The consequences are too serious not to.

How to Use This Book

This book is for those of us who, like me, would like to look back one day and declare that our lives were well lived. We can see that living well depends upon thinking well—*about the things that matter*. We want to learn how to overcome decision fatigue, stop feeling overwhelmed, and bring more peace and joy into our lives. That means learning strategies for approaching both our minutes and our days.

Over time, I have deliberately cultivated processes I can trust, ones I turn to when I'm wandering into overthinking territory. Over the years, I've seen how simple strategies and subtle shifts of perspective can trigger lightbulb moments that make some aspect of life easier. These small shifts, taken one at a time, are just that: small. Yet cumulatively, they've transformed my life.

I wanted to share this information with others, and that's why you're holding this book in your hands. Helpful information already exists on this topic, particularly on the subject of rumination, but I couldn't find any existing resources that address all the ways I knew I was overthinking or that share strategies to help me avoid more than just ruminating. As I learned more and more about overthinking, I grew more and more surprised by just how many facets of our lives overthinking touches. I wanted to write a book that reflected both the far-reaching, destructive effects of overthinking and the not-always-obvious ways we can learn to do better.

I got my start in writing as a blogger. My favorite posts over the years have been those that combine unexpected, seemingly unrelated elements in a way that provides fresh insight by letting the reader see a situation—and herself—in a new way. This book reflects that same approach in subject and scope: it divides things along lines you might not expect, covers topics you may not anticipate, and takes a broader view than previous books on the subject. I've done this on purpose, because I believe the subject merits it. And we, as women, need it.

We can learn how to stop overthinking on a persistent basis by doing these things:

- *Setting ourselves up for success.* We'll examine the importance of laying a solid foundation that enables us to become the kind of people who are not prone to overthinking.
- *Taking charge.* We'll learn how to overcome unhealthy thought patterns in the moment and implement practices that make it harder to lapse into these patterns in the first place.
- *Letting the sun shine in.* Overthinkers too often think themselves out of life's simple pleasures, but we'll examine how to smartly think our way *into* them.

You are not doomed to a life of overthinking. You *can* do better, but it won't happen instantly. Getting your thought life under control is a process. It has been for me, as you will see. Some days I do well; I'm satisfied with how I'm spending my hours—and by extension, my life. Sometimes I struggle, and I know I will continue to do so. I'm never going to “arrive,” but I can see how far I've come. The process hasn't been easy, but it's been worth it.

And it can be for you too.

In this book, we'll explore the practices that have helped me and so many others overcome overthinking. Some strategies are mundane, while others are easy to grasp and instantly life-changing. Some are about money and memories, while others are about simple abundance. Some are weightier, while others help us reach a decision when the answer isn't obvious.

It's that last strategy that finally jolted me out of my Nashville funk last June. Let's go back to my kitchen table, where I'm locked in to The Weather Channel website, refreshing the page like a madwoman, hoping for a better answer that's never going to come.

My friend replies to my SOS text with laughter and then asks: “What's stressing you out about the travel details?” She asks me to articulate the precise issue, and I do: I tell her I hate my options. Giving voice to that reality doesn't feel like a complaint; it feels like clarity. *I'm not going to be happy either way.*

Even if I don't *like* the outcome, that doesn't mean it's not the *right* outcome. And that frees me to choose.

I'm no longer frantic. I check the forecast—with purpose this time. I check the traffic situation. I push back from the computer with a plan, and I leave a few hours later, twenty-two hours earlier than scheduled. It's not ideal, but it works, and the decision is blessedly behind me.

It only rains a little on the way.

.....Next Steps.....

Take the following quiz to see if you are an overthinker.

1. Do you sometimes lavish mental energy on things that don't deserve it?
2. Are there times when you can't seem to think about anything else, even though you know your thoughts are better spent elsewhere?
3. Do you ever feel stuck reviewing something that happened in the past?
4. Do you frequently second-guess yourself?
5. Do you fret about the small stuff and spend too much time thinking about relatively insignificant issues or problems?
6. Do your thoughts sometimes keep you up at night?
7. Do you engage in thoughts you know to be repetitive, unhealthy, and unhelpful?

If you answered yes to some of these questions, you tend to overthink things. Keep reading, because you don't have to keep doing it.